Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 59

Heavenly Bodies

Portion

The Trial and Tribulations

'Death into the soul world and how one gets there- Heaven or Hell and Afterlife nevertheless, Darkness or the Light. Life of choices to the life of decisions- of never-ending determinations.'

~*~

Nevaeh- More remembrances of the past, I remember my mother's life looking into it of her being locked into cages like dogs naked, with a dog dish- with a leash.

I remember her doing the same with me and my stepbrothers, and sisters.

That was the love we both had, yet my dad went on like she was cowardly.

Nonetheless, of all, a good man- that lost his life to save mine over his dead body my mother took me, to be victimized.

Lily has the same thing, over the make that mother was the same as my mother thinks in the same ways, doing the same things to kids that are a waste of life.

To just grow and suck off everyone else's paycheck, and the guardian was not much better, that was also made an award and made less-than-ideal to make my life choices, for it was up to the town, to make me whom I became, and that is why, I wanted out, of the tributes of my past, that took over the future. I have been called a jealous writer who cannot produce what I did? By them, so-o… or you just do not understand, screaming when you need to be hearing the truths, about your trials and tribulations.

Disabilities- on you and with your family, and your real mother being crazy has NOTHING to do with me, or is it everything they see, the past of the apple not falling far from the tree?

I do not get SSI for disability, because they never thought I was disabled, yet I had the disabled education. Thus, making me out to be next to black, in a homeland of prejudice with the intent of miming… so judgmental, live your own life, I thought… sure, that would be so-o, if I could have one.

Do- I have one…?

The question is… am I worthy of one?

Take your path, yet really, you are not given one, looking back a remembrance.

I understood you, is all I get from them, then fine, and I can be the one as simple, sure- sure… think again. Public or not it is what has become known about you, without not knowing anything other than speculation of twisted over the fact it makes good cheap storylines.

Yes, I remember because- you want me to being locked in a dog cage

that was 2 foot by 4 foot, oh so nude, and dirty… for day after day, with no lights, and in my mind, it remains now true, just like my mom and her sisters that was molested by her dad, yet he wore the little blue hat, and the badge, and called himself a police officer, within a municipality just like all them criminals too.

Yet, I am the one under phycological evaluation, yet they can molest as they please, call them pigs- call them all fags- call them what you like… say everything is fake and gay too.

When do we get to play the victim, I have to say that to a DA, at some point- if allowed to ever speak?

Therefore, I did not do anything with my mother's cremated ashes- after being placed in an earn, other than me dumping them out, letting the wind take them as it placed, next to her dad's grave- the pig- that I call my granddad- on her side. Yet, father like daughter…

Then I remember a girl that we got into our world named Brenna, and then I do not feel that my life was all that bad.

Sometimes, I wish not- to linger in the bodies of the girls, that I learn to love- and look after as an angel of death, over the fact they all suffer. And then they get here and forget about me being there for them… yet that is okay- that is the way it must be.

She calls her story ‘The universe too its Mistakes,’ and I had to question this yet feel the same way.

She was one that was chosen to die this way- even if there is now a remedy- if you got the money, in her world, the question I have is why- it feels so wrong to me- yet that is life to them…

Chapter: 1

It was the ending of the cold dark glum winter of the tenth year of my young also fragile life.

My mother was ever so-o unquestionable that- I disheartened, dejected, also dismayed.

Ostensibly- because I never really wanted to leave my room, as to the ways I for one felt. In my house, in my room I feel whole also all one, not falling apart.

Cry here also no one sees it. Expended quite a lot of time in my single bed all pink also girlie, I read some also

play rock music, or have the television blasting also not witching, I DO THE SAME THINGS OVER ALSO OVER, like flipping throughout the same book over also over, annoyed infrequently, like those things called boys do to me too, also enthusiastic moderately a moment of my plentiful allowed time to thoughtful about bereavement. Every time you recite a malignant cell brochure or webpage or some crap you do not even freak need to see. What is love? I would not know or will I at this point. All that, they always list hopelessness surrounded by the side paraphernalia of bad cancer.

On the other also, in circumstance, downheartedness is not a side-effect of sarcoma. Melancholy is a side effect of vanishing in bereavement.

(Tumors can be also the side-effect of failing to dust in the ash of death final- moments. Practically- everything is dust pissing in the heart.)

Then again, my mamma alleged I personally obligatory cure, subsequently, she seized me to see my Regular Doctor Tim Smith, who agreed sucks butt, also I would rather be spread at the guyno’s then be looking at his old face, up to my nose, that I was veritably be drenched in

wetness also entire clinical downheartedness, in addition to that for that reason my meds should be in the swing of things besides also I will be dutybound to Candelaria with your presence a journal Provision Assembly at my church. Kill me- God- just do it! This Provision Assemblage highlighted a gyratory dramatis personae of calligraphies in several situations of malignant tumor swelling- single-minded un-thriving-ness.

Why? The company interchange-sacking? A side-effect of disappearing.

The Maintenance Collection, of development, was disheartening as a nether underworld. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone-walled Prelatic church bent like a cantankerous. We all sat in a square right in the middle of the room looking at marrying looking back- all creepy eyed-like staring at you, I feel what she does virgin for life also death, where the four boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been.

I Bryana observed this because Codi, the Care Clutch front-runner as well as only creature over twenty in the room,

looking at eye looking at us like flowing us with their wonderful eyes in the tall glass, also statues. As an undeveloped boob-less malignant cells fighter, I like them all sitting right in saying crap we do not feel is need for death, also kicking it.

~*~

So, here is us all, seven or so, sauntered halberd also veered in, nibbled at a dilapidated choice of cookies, milk, also coffee that sucks so bad you have no idea, sat down with dumbly mined hope to see ninety or more surely right. As well as listening to Codi second opinion for yet another painful kill me pleas time, his

disappointingly down about life-lasting-off in what manner he had malignancy in his sack, also had on popped out has it in a jar on his desk now, see it, in addition to they thought he was going to die but he did not die, just put it next mine ripped out heart on suck life. Plus, now here he is, an occupied- fully-fledged mature in an ecclesiastical lower ground floor in the 745th nicest city in Cambria counties, unconnected, hooked to WIII also PC-sports gaming like roller coaster tycoon, stereotypically companionless, seeing out of available insufficient breathing, also excisions life expectancy.

The universe too its mistakes by exploiting his tumor-tactic past happy go lucky marrons, at St. Jude's hospital slowly at work doing this my way nearing a master's degree that will not improve their jobs projections, in the making, as we altogether look after, for the weapon of pain. To give me the release that he run-away low folks many eons ago when malignancy took individually of his dan-gel-ie's off but spared what only one- only, snip- snip- just rip the dick off at this point, he is so not getting it. The most substantial personality would call his lifetime.

IN ADDITION TO you, being MOREOVER POWER BE so-o FORTUNATE! At that juncture, we familiarized ourselves- Name- Age- Diagnosis- sex-life. Hi- Bill- Dick- also then Mike Peter’s takes, we know he sucks- balls also sacks are gay homie doing little boys! Hi, all he believed in his tard-ed- voice! Besides, in what manner are we liability today? I am Bryana, I would say when they would He Get to me.

Bry- Ten year’s young kids, I have no hair on my vagina., also have a training bra, originally but with an impressive besides extended-settled

satellite colony in my heart. Besides, I am a responsibility unacceptable. As soon as we got around the loop, Codi always asked if anybody wanted to segment. Also, then commenced the loop bump of livelihood- all also sundry chatting aggressive also attacking plus also winning withdrawal besides skimming.

To be fair-minded to Codi, he let us talk about dying, as well. On the other also a maximum of them be situated in dying. Utmost would live into childhood, as Codi had. (Witch unescapable nearby was fairly a lot of affordability approximately it, with every Tom, Dick,

also Harry wanting to beat not only cancer itself, but also the other people in the room. Like, I realize that this is irrational, but when they tell you that you have, say, a twenty percent chance of living three more years, the mathematics chicks in also you figure that’s one in five… consequently, you look around also think, as any in good physical shape person would- I got to outlive some of these bastards' ass wipes.)

Chapter: 2

The only in your favor façade of life and hope, I was this kid named Amy-sue, a long-faced, skinny girl with square

Fair-haired hair cleaned over one eye. Also, her eyes were problematic. He had some tremendously unlikely eye malignant cells. The lone eye had been bowdlerized out when he was a kid, also this day also age she wore the dense eyeglasses that made her eyes- (Both the physical massive also cute to me in a wired way like never.)

Preternaturally huge, like his whole head was just her big blue eyes on me, as well as this as mine staring at her. Love? I do not think so… yet more wired things have happened. ‘If you can stay in

love for more than two years, you're on something.’

~*~

From what I gathered about this world I must face with a ripped-up mind of thinking, I will crease on the rare junctures when Amy shared with the group, a reappearance had employed his outstanding judgment in sexy worldly danger. Amy, also I joined about completely over moans. Each time someone deliberated anti-cancer-ion nourishments or grunting ground-up shark fin or whatever, she would peep

over at me, also exhalation ever so to some extent.

I wobble my head microscopically also respire in rejoinder. So, Support Group here, also later a small number of weeks, I grew to be thrusting-also-screaming about the entire issue. In detail, on Saturday I made the confrère of Jamara Fairlee, I tried my level best to get out of Support Group while sitting on the couch with my mom in the third leg of a twelve-hour marathon of the previous season's America's Next Top Model, which admittedly I had already seen, but unmoving. Yours truly- 'I refuse to attend

Support Group.’ Mamma- ‘Lone of the signs of downheartedness is indifference in happenings.’ I- ‘Please just let me watch America’s Next Top Model. It’s commotion.’ Mother- ‘Television is a passivity.’

~*~

Me- ‘Ugh, Mom, please.’ Mom- ‘Bryana, you’re a pre-preteen. You’re not a little kid any longer. You need to make friends, get out of the house, also live your life.’ Me- ‘If you want me to be a pre-pre-teen, don’t send me to a Support Group like this. Buy me a fake dildo so I can go to have a dick inside before I die.’

Mom- ‘You don’t take the pot, for appetizers.’ Me- ‘See, that’s sympathetic to think I’d know if you change to me to not get one.’ Mom- ‘You’re going to Support Group finds one there if you think that what you need to live on.’

Me- ‘UGH.’ Mom- ‘Bryana, you deserve a life also love.’

That shut me up, even though I failed to see how attendance at the Support Group met the classification of life. Motionless, I approved to go- after transferring the right to greatest the 1.5 episodes of ANTM I would be missing. I went to Support Group for the same

reason that I had once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named… substances- I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you are a pre-teen, also that is having a kid who bites it from malignant cells. Mom pulled into the circular driveway behind the church at 2-59. yours truly fake to fiddle with my oxygen tank for a second just to kill time. ‘Do you want me to carry it in for you?’

‘Nope, it’s fine,’ I believed. The cylindrical khaki tank only weighed a few

pounds, also I had this little steel cart to wheel it around behind me. It delivered two liters of oxygen to me each minute through a cannula, a transparent tube that split just beneath my neck, enfolded in arrears of my ears, also then reunited in my nostrils. The contraption was compulsory because my heart sucked at being what I need to keep pounding also begging. ‘I love you,’ she believed as I got out.

‘You too, Mom. See you at seven-ish.’

‘Make acquaintances also girlfriends!’ she believed through the

rolled-down window as I walked away. I did not want to take the elevator because taking the elevator is a Last Days kind of activity at Support Group, so I took the stairs. I grabbed a cookie also poured some then milk into a Dixie cup then twisted around. A girl was staring at me. It was her. I was quite sure I had never seen her before. Long also leanly muscular, he dwarfed the molded plastic elementary school chair he was sitting in. light hair, straight also longer for a girl like me. She looked my age or younger, a year older, IDK also she sat with his tailbone against the edge of the chair, his

posture aggressively underprivileged, one also half in a pocket of the dim short skirt.

I looked away, unexpectedly cognizant of my numberless insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, also a white T-shirt advertising and I did not even like it anymore. Also, my hair brown- I had this bob haircut, also I had not even bothered to, like, brush it. Furthermore, she had a ridiculous top, a hat off to the side also a pipe-like she was smoking for the effect of allowing shit to live that suck, Winnie. I looked like a regular person with a hot-air

balloon ahead. This was not even to mention the tackle situation. Also, yet- I cut a glance at her, also his eyes were still on me. It occurred to me why they call it eye communication.

I walked into the circle also sat down next to Amy, two seats away from the girl.

I glanced again. She was still watching me. Look, let me just say it- He was hot. A non-sexy girl stare at you relentlessly also it is, at best, awkward, at worst, a form of assault. But hot girls… well. I pulled out my phone also clicked it so it would display the time-

6-57-sh.

The circle filled in with the unlucky twelve-to-eight, also then Codi started us out with the serenity prayer- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change yet Understand also as hope true faith, the courage to change the things I can, also the wisdom to know the difference. The guy was still staring at me. I felt blushed looking at her rubbing her legs. Finally, I decided that the proper strategy was to stare back. Boys do not have a monopoly on the Staring Business. So, I looked her over as Codi acknowledged for the thousandth

time his ball-lessness and so on, also soon it was a staring contest. After a while, the boy smiled, also then finally his blue eyes glanced away. When he looked back at me, I flicked my eyebrows up to say, I triumphed. She shrugged; Codi continued also then finally it was time for the introductions.

‘She, perhaps you’d like to go first today. I know you’re facing a challenging time.’ ‘Surely,’ she believed. ‘I’m Mis. Fairlee. I am not even a teen. Also, it looks like I must get surgery in a couple of weeks, after which I will be blind. Not to criticize or anything because

I know a lot of us have it worse, but surely, I mean, being blind does not sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. Also, friends like Jamara.' He nodded toward the boy, who now had a tag. 'So, surely,' she continued. He was looking at his also, which he had folded into each other like the top of a tepee. 'There's nothing you can do about it.'

Chapter: 3

'We're here for you, her,' Codi believed. 'Let that girl hear it, guys.' Also, then we all, in a monotone, believed, 'We're here for you, she.' Michael was next. He was twelve. He had his dick up

his boyfriend's butt also got shit I do not want to repeat. Gay ass marron. He had always had something not right just look at that face to see it all. He was okay.

(Or so he believed. He had taken the stowage herbal.)

Linda was nine, also pretty enough to be the object of the hot boy’s eye. She was a regular in a long remission from appendicular cancer, which I had not previously known existed. She believed-as she had every other time, I had attended Support Group-witch she felt resilient, which felt like big-headed to me as the oxygen-drizzling nubs tickled

my nostrils. There were five others before they got to her. She smiled a little when his turn came. Her voice was low, smoky, also dead sexy.

‘My name is Jamara aka she or her- last name Fairlee don’t matter for shit,’ he believed. ‘I’m a day away from 13. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year also a half ago, but I’m just here today’s father’s request.’ ‘Also, how are you feeling?’ asked Codi. ‘Oh, I’m also.’ Jamara Fairlee smiled with a cornered mouth. ‘I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend.’

When it was my turn, I believed, ‘My name is Bryana. I am 10. Not going to see tomorrow up till now I’m okay I want to see the heavens.’ The hour proceeded apace- Fights were recounted, battles won amid wars sure to be lost; hope was clung to; families were both celebrated also denounced; it was agreed that friends just did not get it; tears were shed; comfort proffered.

Neither Jamara Fairlee nor I spoke again until Codi believed, ‘Jamara, perhaps you’d like to share your fears with the group.’ ‘My fears?’ ‘Naturally.’ ‘I fear oblivion,’ he believed without a

moment’s hiatus. ‘I fear it like the proverbial blind man who’s afraid of the dark.’ ‘Too shortly,’ she believed, cracking a smile. ‘Was that insensitive?’

Jamara asked. ‘I can be pretty blind to other people’s feelings.’

~*~

She was laughing, but Codi raised a chastening finger also believed, ‘Jamara, please. Let us return to you also your struggles. You believed you fear oblivion?’ ‘I did,’ Jamara answered. Codi seemed lost. ‘Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?’ I had not been to a

proper school for three years. My parents were my two best friends.

My third best friend was an author who did not know I existed. I was a shy person- not the also- floating nature.

Also, yet, just this once, I decided to speak. I half raised my also Codi, his delight evident, immediately believed, ‘Bryana!’ I was, I am sure he assumed, opening. Becoming Part of The Group she was.

I looked over at Jamara Fairlee, who looked back at me.

You could almost see through his eyes they were so cobalt. ‘There will come a time,’ I believed, ‘when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when no human beings are remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did everything.

There will be no one left to remember movies also not have sex, let alone you. Everything that we did also build also wrote thought discovered will be forgotten also all of this,’ I gestured encompassing- ‘will have been for naught. That time is coming soon also maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we

survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was a time before organisms experienced consciousness, also there will be time after. Besides, if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that's what everyone else does.' I had learned this from my third best friend, Saundra Stouten, the reclusive author of An Imperial Affliction, the book that was as close a thing as I had to a Bible. SHE- was the only person I had ever come across who seemed to 1 recognize what it is like to be dying, also 2 not have died. After I finished, there was quite an extended

period of silence as I watched a smile spread across Jamara's face-not the little-crooked smile of the boy trying to be sexy while he stared at me, but his real smile, too big for his face.

'Damn,' Jamara believed quietly. 'Aren't you something else?' Neither of us believed anything for the rest of the Support Group. In the end, we all had to hold haloes, also Codi led us in prayer. 'Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, literally in your heart, as cancer survivors. You also know us alone as we know ourselves. Guide us to also live the Light through our times of trial.

We pray for her eyes, for Michael's also Jamie's blood, for Jamara's bones, for Bryana's heart, for James's throat. We pray that You might heal us also that we might feel Your love, also Your peace, which passes all Understand also.

~*~

Also, we remember in our hearts those whom we knew also loved who have gone home to you- Maria also Kade Joseph Haley sigil pangolins Mayor Gabriel… It was an extensive list. The world contains a lot of dead people. Also, while Codi droned on, reading the list from a sheet of paper because it was too

long to memorize, I kept my eyes closed, trying to think prayerfully but mostly Visualization the day when my name would find its way onto that list, all the way at the end when everyone had stopped listening. When Codi was finished, we believed this stupid mantra together-LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY- also was over.

Jamara Fairlee pushed herself out of his chair also walked over to me. His gait was crooked like his smile. She towered over me, but he kept his distance so I would not have to crane my neck to

look her in the eye. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked. ‘Bryana.’

Chapter: 4

‘It’s a metaphor,’ he believed. ‘You choose your behaviors based on their symbolic resonances…’ I believed. ‘Oh, yes.’ He smiled. The big, ridiculous, real smile. ‘I’m a big believer in metaphor, Bryana.’ I turned to the car. Commissioned the window. It rolled down. ‘I’m going to a movie with Jamara Fairlee,’ I believed. ‘Please record the next several episodes of the ANTM marathon for me.’ then it happened…

It was I, however, who was closest to it. I am fifty-seven years old, but even now I can remember everything from that year, down to the smallest details. I relive that year often in my mind, bringing it back to life, also I realize that when I do, I always feel a strange combination of sadness also joy. There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock also take all the unhappiness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well. So, I take the memories as they come, accepting them all, letting them guide me whenever I can.

This happens more often than I let on. It is April 14, the last year before the millennium, also as I leave my household, I glance around. The sky is overcast also ashen, but as I move down the street, I notice that the dogwoods also lilies are blooming. I zip my top just a little. The temperature is cool, though I know it is only a substance of weeks before it will settle in to comfortable also the steely skies give way to the kind of days that make PA one of the most beautiful places in the world. With a moan, I feel it all coming back to me to see my life flash by with only some days to go. I know I close my eyes also the

years begin to move in reverse, slowly ticking backward, like the also of a clock rotating in the wrong direction.

As if through someone else's eyes, I watch myself grow younger; I see my hair changing from gray to brown, I feel the wrinkles around my eyes begin to smooth, my arms also legs grow sinewy.

Lessons I have learned with age grow dimmer, also my innocence returns as that eventful year styles. Then, like me, the world begins to change- roads contracted also some become shingle, outlying sprawl has been substituted with wood also, downtown streets teeming

with people, looking in windows as they pass fields of corn, Men wear long shorts, girls wear dresses not short enough. At the courthouse up the street, the church tower rings... I open my eyes to also awkward moments. I am standing outside the Baptist church, also when I stare at the table, I know exactly This is my story; I potential to leave nothing out, if I do not my heart will stop dead. First, you will smile, also then you will cry-do not say you have not been warned.

Samara responded, ‘I’ll say.’ she clasped Amy by both shoulders also then took a half step away from her. ‘Express

Bryana about the clinic.’ ‘Um, Bryana is awesome.’ ‘No, your full name Stevenson.’ She was about to say something else when she walked up. ‘Hold on,’ Jamara believed, raising a finger, also turned other. ‘That was worse than you made it out to be.’ ‘I told you it was drab.’ ‘Why do you bother with it?’ ‘I don’t know. It's kind of help?’

Jamara leaned in so he thought I could not hear. ‘She’s a regular?’ I could not hearer's comment, but She leaned also against the snack table focused her huge eye on me.

‘All right, so I went to the clinic this before noon, also I was telling my surgeon that I’d rather be deaf than blind. Also, he believed, ‘It doesn’t work that way, also I was, like, ‘Surely, I realize it does not work that way; I am just saying I would rather be deaf than blind if I had the choice, which I realize I do not have,’ also he believed, ‘Well, the good news is that you will not be deaf,’ also I was like, Thank you for explaining that my eye cancer isn’t going to make me deaf. I feel so privileged that a cerebral miniature like yourself would design to operate on me.’ ‘He sounds like a winner,’ I believed. ‘I’m going to try to get me some eye

cancer just so I can make these girls acquaintance.’

Chapter: 5

‘Good luck with that. All right, I should go. Monica’s also Tiff waiting for me. I got to look at her a lot while I can.’ ‘Counterinsurgency tomorrow?’ Jamara asked. ‘Definitely,’ she turned also ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Jamara Fairlee turned to me. ‘Literally,’ he believed. ‘Literally?’ I asked.

‘Someone should tell Jesus to say also not die like us,’ I believed. ‘I mean,

it’s got to be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.’

‘I would tell Her myself,’ Jamara believed, ‘but unfortunately, I am stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me.’ I laughed. He shook his head, just looking at me. ‘What?’ I asked.

‘Nothing,’ he believed. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ Jamara half-smiled. ‘Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, also I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.’

A brief awkward silence ensued. Jamara plowed through- ‘I mean, particularly given that, as you so appetizingly pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion also everything.’ I kind of jeered or groaned or exhaled in a way that was imprecisely cough also then believed, ‘I’m not beautiful,’ ‘You’re like a millennial Nattalie worker. Like V for ‘Never seen it,’ I believed. ‘Really?’ she asked. ‘Pixie-haired gorgeous girl dislikes authority also can’t help but fall for a boy she knows is trouble. It’s your autobiography, as far as I can tell.’ She is every syllable flirted. Honestly, he turned me on. I did not even know that guys

could turn me on-not, like, in real life. A younger girl walked past us. ‘How is it going, Alisa?’ she asked. She smiled also mumbled…

‘Hi, Jamara.’

‘Memorial people,’ he explained. Memorial was an extensive research hospital. ‘Where do you go?’ ‘Children’s,’ I believed, my voice smaller than I expected it to be. He nodded. The conversation seemed over. ‘Well,’ I believed, nodding vaguely toward the steps that led us out with us all laid out not getting laid out. I tilted my cart onto its wheels also started walking. He limped

beside me. ‘So, see you next time, maybe?’ I asked. ‘Okay,’ I believed. ‘I’ll look it up.’ ‘No. With me. At my house,’ he believed. ‘Now.’ I stopped walking. ‘I hardly know you, Jamara Fairlee.

You could be a battleax slayer.’ she nodded. ‘True enough, Bryana Candelaria.’ He walked past me, his shoulders filling out his green knit polo shirt, his back straight, his steps lilting just slightly to the right as she walked steadily also confident on what I had determined was a prosthetic leg. Osteosarcoma sometimes takes a member to check you out.

Then, if it likes you, it takes the rest. I followed her upstairs, losing ground as I made my way up slowly, stairs not being a field of expertise for my heart, also in the parking lot, the spring air just on the cold side of perfect, the late-afternoon light heavenly in its hurtfulness. Mom was not there yet, which was unusual because Mom was always waiting for me. I glimpsed around also saw that a tall, curvy brunette girl had her pinned against the stone wall of the church, kissing her aggressively.

They were close sufficient to me that I could hear the weird noises of their

mouths together, also I could hear her saying, ‘Always also forever,’ also her saying, ‘Always also forever,’ in homecoming. Rapidly stashing next to me, Jamara half-whispered, ‘They’re big believers in PDA.’ ‘What’s with the ‘always?’ The slurping sounds intensified. ‘Continuously is their thing. They will always love each other also whatever. I would conservatively estimate they have texted each other the word always four million periods in the last year.’ I have not even gotten my period yet to have this all go down. A couple more cars drove up, taking Michael also Alyse away. It was just Jamara also me now, watching Amy

also Monica, who proceeded apace as if they were not leaning against a place of worship. She also reached for her boob over her shirt pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt good. It did not seem like it would, but I decided to absolve Amy because he was going blind.

The senses must feast while there is yet hunger also whatever. ‘Visualize taking that last drive to the hospital,’ I believed without thinking fast, quietly. ‘The former time you will ever drive a car.’ Without looking over at me, Jamara believed,

‘You’re killing my small’s atmosphere here, Bryana Candelaria. I’m trying to observe young love in its many-splen-dored awkwardness.’ ‘I think he’s hurting her boob,’ I believed. ‘Absolutely, it’s difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam.’ Then Jamara Fairlee reached into a pocket also pulled out, of all things, a pack of cigarettes. He flipped it open also put a pipe between her lips. ‘Are you serious?’ I asked. ‘You think that’s cool? Oh, my God, you just ruined the whole thing.’ ‘Which whole thing?’ he asked, turning to me. The pipe dangled unlit from the unsmiling corner of her mouth

like her finger may do. When I was ten, my life changed persistently.

I know that there are people who wonder about me when I Say this. They look at me strangely as if trying to fathom what could have happened back then, though I seldom bother to explain. Because I have lived here for most of my life, I do not feel that I must unless it is on my terms, also that would take more time than most people are willing to give me. My story cannot be summed up in two or three sentences; it cannot be packaged into something neat also simple that people would immediately understand-so.

Despite the passage of forty years, the people still living here who knew me that year accept my lack of explanation without question. My story in some ways is their story because it was something that all of us lived through.

‘The whole thing where a boy who is not unattractive or unintelligent or seemingly in any way unacceptable stares at me also points out incorrect uses of literality also compares me to actors asks me to watch a movie at her house. But of course- there is always a hamartia also yours is that oh, my God, even though you HAD FREAKING CANCER UP YOUR BUM

can give money to a company in exchange for the chance to acquire YET MORE CANCER. Oh, my God. Let me just assure you that not being able to breathe? SUCKS. Disappointing.

Totally.

'A hamartia?' she asked, the pipe still in his mouth. It tightened his jaw. He had a hell of a jawline, unfortunately. 'A fatal flaw,' I explained, turning away from her. I for one stepped toward the curb, leaving Jamara Fairlee behind me, also then I heard a car start down the street. It was Mom. She had been waiting for me to, like, make friends or whatever bitch.

This weird mix of disappointment also anger welling up inside of me. I do not even know what the feeling was just that there was a lot of it, also I wanted to smack Jamara Fairlee to replace my heart with a heart that did not suck at being heart. I was stashing with my Taylors also Ralsoy on the very edge of the curb, the oxygen tank ball-also chaining in the cart by my side, also right as my mom pulled up, a halo grabs mine. I yanked my also free but turned back to her.

‘They don’t kill you without you light them,’ he believed as Mom arrived at the curb. ‘Also, I’ve never lit one. It’s a

metaphor, see- You put the killing thing right between your white trash teen teeth, but you don't give it the power to do its killing.'

'It's a figure of speech,' I believed, dubious. Mom was just idling.

Time-ish

Ending-ish

~*~

Chapter: 6

Bryana- she saw me the moment I raised I also, flashed her very at 3-33 precisely, I noticed Amy stomping

confidently past my home. White also newly straightened teeth at me, also headed over. Head as she leaned down to hug me. She just happened to be an extremely cultured fourteen jetsetter trapped inside in a pre-teen body in PA. All also sundry accepted it as I did. It was cute to me. She wore lap-length dresses that appropriate short-coming-less-ly, also shades that subjugated her face. ‘I don’t even know anymore. Is that diet?’ I nodded also haloed it to her.

She sipped through the straw. ‘I do wish you were at school these days. Some of the boys have become absolutely

ripe.’ She pushed them up onto the top of her… ‘I’ve been dating Derek Wellington for a bit,’ she believed, ‘but I don’t think it will last. She is such a boy. But enough about me. What is new in Bryana stanza?’ ‘Dear sweetie,’ she believed, vaguely British.

‘How are you?’ People did not find the accent odd or off-putting.

‘I’m good. How are you, baby?’ ‘Oh? Like whom?’ I asked. She progressed to name three girls we had attended elementary also a middle school with, but I could not print any of them in my mind. ‘Zilch, really,’ I believed. ‘Health is good?’

‘The same, I guess?’ ‘Assemblage for!’ she enthused, smiling. ‘So- you could just live forever, right?’

~*~

Feel-ish

‘Probably not forever,’ I whispered. ‘What in heaven is that?’ asked her, gesticulating to the manuscript. ‘But basically,’ she believed. ‘What else is new?’ I thought of telling her that I was seeing a boy, too, or at least that I watched a movie with a single, just because I knew it would wonder, also amazed by her that anyone as tousled;

also, awkwardly, stunted as I could even briefly win the loves of a girl could be. But I did not have much to brag about, so I just shrugged. ‘Oh, it’s fantasy. I have gotten into it. It’s a series.’ ‘I am shocked. Be going to we spree?’ Were too long, as if the second toe was a window into the soul or something. So, when I pointed out a pair of individual toe socks that would suit her skin tone, she was like…

‘Naturally, but…’ the but being but they will expose my hideous second toes to the public, also I believed, ‘her, you’re the We went to this shoe store. As we were shopping, Caitlyn kept picking

out all these open-toed flats for me also saying, ‘These would look cute on you,’ which reminded me that Kaitlyn never wore open-toed shoes on account of how she hated her feet because she felt her lost toes only person, I have ever known to have toe-specific dysmorphia,’ also she believed, ‘What is that?’

‘Sure,’ I believed, also hung up. If you could drive in a straight line, it would only take like five minutes to get from my house to her house, but you cannot drive in a straight line because the amusement Park is between us. Even though it was a geographic inconvenience, I liked

Holliday Park. When I was a little kid, I would wade in the Allegheny Creeks with my mom also there was always this great moment when he would throw me up in the air, just throw me away from her, also I would reach out my arms as I flew also he would reach out his arms, also then we would both see that our arms were not going to touch also no one was going to catch me, also it would kind of scared the shit out of both of us in the best possible way, also then I would legs-failingly hit the water also then come up for air uninjured also the current would bring me back to her as I believed again,

Daddy, again. I would rather stay home also play with my clit masturbate.

I pulled into the driveway right next to an old blue 1953, I figured was it was hers also she gives it to me as her last washes if something would happen to her. I knew it was mine, yet I wanted her not the car was not imported as she what to me. Dragging the tank behind me, I walked up to the door. I knocked her dad come back with emotions as the keys halo over to me saying take it now. ‘Just Bryana,’ he believed. ‘Nice to see you this is my baby also my baby also I am losing both now.’ ‘She believed I could come

over her also let me hug both of you it may be the last time I do?' At which point there was a wail from below. 'That would be her love in life,' her dad believed, also shook his head slowly, saying I did not think she would fall for a girl yet you are the one she loves more than life so that works for me God works in odd ways- no? 'She headed for a drive. The sound of the motor rumbling.' he believed, drifting off. 'Anyway, you are wanted to drive yet not old enough, can I carry you are in the car, uh, tank?' she asked.

I believed yet at this point she could not movie much too week, 'Thanks,

I need you to.' 'She,' he believed. I was scared to go down there past them all that heat on us of death. Eavesdropping on people howl in misery is not among my favorite pastimes. But I went. 'Bryana Love-,' she believed as he heard my footsteps. 'Her, Bryana from Support Group is coming downstairs me holding her. Bryana, a gentle reminder- she is during a psychotic affair.'

~*~

'Bryana?' asked her.

'How are you, 'I am okay,' I believed. 'Amy?' No response her mouth

open as we kissed it, and in also more. Not even the slightest hint that he was aware of my existence. Only when I got parallel to them did I seeker's face. Tears streamed down his reddened cheeks in a continual flow, his face a taut mask of pain. Also, Amy was sitting on the floor in gaming chairs shaped like lazy Salsoy, staring up at a gargantuan television. The screen was split between her point of view on the left, also Her on the right. They were soldiers fighting in a bombed-out modern city.

I recognized the place from The Price of Dawn. As I move toward, I saw

nothing unusual- just two guys sitting in the light wash of a huge television pretending to kill people. She stared at the screen, not even glancing at me, also howled, and all the while pounding away at his controller. Just the tears flowing down his face onto his white T-shirt also it was so wet it was becoming see though I did not think of the girl could cry that much.

SHE glanced away from the screen ever so briefly. ‘You look nice,’ he believed. I was wearing this just-past-the-knees dress I had had forever. ‘Girls think they’re only allowed to wear dresses on

formal occasions, but I like a woman who says, you know, I'm going over to see a girl who is having a nervous failure, a girl whose connection to the sense of sight itself is tenuous, also fuck damn it, I am going to wear a dress for her.' 'Also- yet' I believed, 'SHE won't as much as a glance over at me. Too in love with Monica, I suppose,' which resulted in a catastrophic cry. 'Bit of a touchy subject,' Her elucidated. 'She, I don't know about you, but I have the vague sense that we are being outflanked.' Also- then back to me, 'Her also Monica is no longer a going concern, but he doesn't want to talk about it. He just wants to cry also play

counterinsurgency two- The Price of Startup or down.' 'Fair enough,' I believed. 'She, I feel a growing concern about our position. If you agree, head over to that power station, also I'll cover for you.'

Her the girl I love… ran toward an unremarkable structure not big yet not small, while her enthusiastic a device weapon wildly in a series of quick bursts, marching behind her. 'Anyhow,' she believed to me, 'it doesn't hurt to talk to her. If you have any sage words of feminine advice.' 'His response is probably appropriate,' I believed as a

burst of gunfire from her killed an enemy who had peeked his head out from behind the burned-out husk of a pickup truck. She nodded at the screen. ‘Pain dem-als-os to be felt,’

He believed, which was a line from a Majestic Sickness. ‘You’re sure there’s no one behind us?’ He asked her. Moments later, tracer bullets started whizzing over their heads. ‘Oh, fucking damn it,’ she believed. ‘I don’t mean to criticize you in your moment of great weakness, but you’ve allowed us to be outflanked, also now there’s nothing between the terrorists also the school.’

Her character took off running toward enthusiasm, wildly down a narrow passageway. ‘You could go over the connection also circle back,’ I believed, an approach I knew about thanks to her.

Pain-ish

Chapter: 7

They crouched behind a wall across the street also picked off the enemy one by one. ‘Why do they want to get into school?’ She sighed. ‘Sadly, the bridge is already under insurgent control due to questionable strategizing by my

bereft cohort.’ ‘Me?’ she believed; his voice breathy. Me!

‘You’re the one who suggested we hole up in the freaking power station.’ She turned away from the screen for a second also flashed her curved yet nice-looking smile.

‘I knew you could talk, buddy,’ he believed. ‘Now let us go save some illusory schoolchildren.’ Together, they ran down the alleyway, firing also hiding at the right moments, until they reached this one- story, single-room schoolhouse. I asked the question of what was within.

‘They want the kids as prisoners,’ She responded. His shoulders rounded over her organizer, thumping buttons, her forewarns taut, veins visible. She leaned toward the screen, the controller dancing in his thin-inform on also. ‘Get it got it- do it you- get- it,’ Her believed. The waves of terrorists continued, also they mowed down everyone, their shooting astonishingly precise, as it had to be, lest they fire into the school. She shouted as something arced across the screen, bounced in the entranceway of the school, also then rolled against the door. Feel the end of life as she knew it. She dropped her controller in dissatisfaction.

‘If the bastards can’t take captives, doctors they just kill them also we just have to say fucking claim.’ ‘Cover me over also get it over NOW!’ she believed as she jumped out from behind the wall also raced toward the school. Amy fumbled for her manager also then started firing while the shots rained down on her, who was shot once also then twice but still ran, her shouting, ‘YOU CAN’T KILL us like this, also with a final flurry of button mixtures, he dove onto the grenade, which detonated beneath her. Her dismembered body exploded like a fountain also the monitor went blue. A hoarse voice believed, ‘UNDERTAKING of

DISAPPOINTMENT,' but she seemed to think otherwise as he smiled at his remnants on the screen. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and shoved it between his teeth. 'Protected the children,' she believed.

'Momentarily,' yours truly piercing out. 'Whoa, okay,' I believed. 'We're just talking about dust pissed in the wind. A pill of shit for the piss to be on.' 'All deliverance is impermanent,' Her potshot back. 'I bought them a miniature. That is minuscule that buys them an hour, which is the hour that buys them a year. No one's going to buy them forever,

Bryana, but my life bought them minuscule. Also, that's not a nonentity.' Go on the mission, physical?' She shrugged as if he believed the game might be real. She was weepy-ish again.

That girl snapped her head back at her. 'Another Amy shook his head no. He leaned over her to look at me also through tightly strung vocal cords believed, 'She didn't want to do it after.' 'She didn't want to dump a blind guy,' I believed. He nodded, the tears not like tears so-o much as a quite metronome-steady, endless. 'She believed she couldn't hassle it,' he told me. 'I'm about

to lose my eyesight also she can’t hassle it.’ I was thinking about the word hassle, also all the unfordable things that get haloed.

‘I’m sorry,’ I believed. She wiped his sopping face with a sleeve. Behind his glasses, her eyes seemed so big that everything else on his face disappeared also it was just these disembodied floating eyes staring at me-one real, one glass. ‘It’s unacceptable,’ he told me. ‘It’s deplorable.’ ‘Well, to be fair-minded,’ I believed, ‘I mean, she probably can’t switch it.

Neither can you, but she does not have to hassle it. Also, you do.'

'Sometimes people don't comprehend the possibilities they're making when they make them,' I believed.

'Myself set aside saying 'always' to her today, 'always all also more,' also she just kept talking to me not saying it back. It was like I was already gone; you know? 'Always' was a promise! How can you just break the capacity?' Amy shot me a look like a gun raining fire. 'Right, of the sequence. But you keep the promise anyway. That is what love is. Love is keeping the promise anyway. I believe in

true love with you girl?' I did not answer. I did not have an answer. But I thought that if true love did exist, that was a good definition of it. 'Well, I believe in true love,' she believed.

'Also, I love her. Also, she promised. She promised me always.' He stood also took a step toward me. I pushed myself up, thinking he wanted a hug or something, but then he just spun around, like he could not remember why he had stood up in the first place, also then Her also I saw this rage settle into his face. she, believed- 'What?' 'You look a little one; see the double entendre, my

friend, but there’s something a little worrying in your eyes.’ Unexpectedly she started kicking the crap out of his gaming chair, which somersaulted back toward her bed.

‘Here we go,’ believed her. She chased after the chair also kicked it again. ‘Yes,’ She believed. ‘Get it. Kick the shit out of that chair!’ SHE kicked the chair again until it bounced against her bed, also then he clutched one of the pillows also started slamming it against the wall, also between the bed; also, the trophy shelf above also the canopy fell on top were she just stayed as I thought of

walking out. SHE looked over at me, cigarette still in his mouth, also half-smiled. ‘I can’t stop thinking about that book.’ I do not want to give up on her love… yet should I what do you think I should do?

‘I know, right?’ stay- walk- stay- walk, you tell me- god’s shit! ‘He never believed what happens to the other characters?’ ‘No,’ I told her. She was still throttling the wall with the pillow. ‘He moved to Amsterdam, which makes me think maybe he is writing development including but he hasn’t published anything new.

He has never talked to me yet; I and he wants so to meet me. Off online. I have written her a bunch of letters asking what happens to everyone, but he always responds say met me also your girlfriend too as so place at some time if you can. So... surely.' appear to be listening.

Instead, he was squinting at her. 'Hold on,' he muffled to us his long story about life also death not to give up on your dreams. He walked over to us also grabbed me by the shoulders do not give up on anything. Live- life to feel alive 'Dude, pillows don't break. Try something that breaks down everything I thought. I

reached for a book from the shelf above the bed also then held it over his head as if waiting for permission.

‘Yes,’ He believed. ‘Yes!’ The trophy smashed against the floor, the arm splintering off as if feel to me, ‘Yes!’ she believed. ‘Get it now!’ Also, then back to me, ‘I have been looking for a way to tell my father that I sort of hate basketball, also I think we’ve found it.’ The book came down one after the other, also she stomped on them, also shrieked while she also stood a few feet away, bearing witness to the insanity. The unfortunate, garbled figures by a ghostly hall-of-so;

there, two torso-less legs caught medium. She kept attacking the trophies, jumping on them with both feet, screaming, breathless, sweaty, until finally, he collapsed on top of the jagged trophic remnants. She stepped toward her also looked down. ‘Feel better?’ she asked. ‘No,’ she mumbled, his chest heaving.

‘That’s the thing about pain,’ Her believed, also then glanced back at me. ‘It's difficulties to be haloed.’ I did not speak to her again for about a week. I had called her on the night of the broken feelings, so per custom, it was his turn to call.

Chapter: 8

Finally, I finished also believed, ‘Can I be excused?’ also they hardly even paused from their conversation about the strength's weaknesses of infrastructure. I grabbed my phone from my purse on the kitchen counter also checked my recent calls. Her Waters. I went out the back door into the twilight. I could see the swing set, also I thought about walking out there also swinging while I talked to her, but it seemed far away given that eating tired me. Instead, I lay down in the grass on the yard’s edge, looked up at Orion, the only constellation I could

recognize, also called her. ‘Bryana love,’ he believed. But he did not. Now, it was not as if I held my phone in my sweaty halo all day, staring at it while wearing my Special pink also white Dress, patiently waiting for my gentleman caller to live up to his nickname. I went about my life- I met Kaitlyn also her (cute but frankly not her for coffee one afternoon; I ingested my recommended daily allowance of Mass for; I attended classes three mornings that week at MCC; also, every night, I sat down to dinner with my mom a dad. Sunday night, we had pizza with green peppers also broccoli.

We were seated around our little circular table in the kitchen when my phone started ringing, but I was not allowed to check it because we have a strict no-phones-during-dinner rule. So, I ate a little while Mom also Dad talked about this storm shit of nothing, I want to hear that had just happened in Papua New Guinea. They met in the Peace or so we all say also so whenever anything happened there, even something terrible, it was like all of a sudden they were not large sedentary creatures, but the young also idealistic also self-satisfactory also rugged people they had once been, also their rapture was such that they didn’t

even glance over at me as I ate faster than I'd ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed also ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs stood again swimming in a rising pool of fluid like my brain also heart. I banished the thought as best I could.

I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple of weeks. If something were wrong, I would find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now also then. Just start cutting things off me now, I believed- what choice

do I have, but to lose this part of me here. Also, yet still, I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying. ‘Hi,’ I believed. ‘How are you?’ he believed. ‘I have been wanting to call you on a nearly minutely basis, but I have been waiting until I could form a coherent thought in a Majestic Sickness.’ (He believed ‘in re.’ He did. That girl.) ‘Also?’ I believed. ‘I think it’s, like. Reading it, I just kept feeling like, like.’ ‘Like?’ I asked, playful her. ‘Like it was a gift?’ he believed askingly. ‘Like you’d given me something important.’ ‘Oh,’ I believed in silence. ‘That’s cheap,’ he believed. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ I believed. ‘No. Don’t apologize you get it also is nice to me, so I move on to keep that in mind.’ ‘But it doesn’t end.’ ‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘You know, like when you look in the mirror also the thing you see is not the thing as it is.’ ‘Oh. Oh,’ she believed. ‘Do you like these?’ She held up a pair of cute but unspectacular Mary Janes, also I nodded, also she found her size also tried them on, pacing up down the aisle, watching her feet in the knee-high angled mirrors. Then she grabbed a pair of strappy, ‘I’d sooner die,’ I assured her hooker shoes also believed, ‘Is it even possible to walk in these? I mean, I would just die-’ also then stopped short, looking

at me as if to say I’m sorry as if it were a crime to mention death to the dying. ‘You should try them on,’ Kaitlyn constant, trying to paper over the clumsiness. I ended up just picking out some flip-flops so that I could have something to buy, also then I sat down on one of the benches opposite a bank of shoes also watched Kaitlyn snake her way through the aisles, shopping with the kind of intensity also focus that one usually associates with professional chess.

I wanted to take out Night-time Emergences also read for a while, but I knew that would be rude, so I just

watched Kaitlyn. Occasionally she would circle back to me clutching some closed-toe prey also say, ‘This?’ also I would try to make an intelligent comment about the shoe, also then finally she bought three pairs also I bought my flip-flops than as we exited, she believed, ‘Anthropologie?’ ‘I should head home actually,’

I-ah believed-ish-

‘I’m kind of sleepy.’

‘Sure, of course,’ she believed. ‘I have to see you more often, darling.’ She placed her also on my shoulders, kissed me on both cheeks, also marched off, her

narrow hips swishing. I did not go home, though. I had told Mom to pick me up at six, also while I figured she was either in the mall or the parking lot, I still wanted the next two hours to myself. I liked my mom, but her perpetual nearness sometimes made me feel weirdly nervous.

Also, I liked Kaitlyn, too. I did. But three years removed from proper full-time schooled exposure to my peers, I felt a certain unbridgeable distance between us. My school friends wanted to help me through my cancer, but they eventually found out that they could not. For one thing, there was not through.

So, I released myself on the grounds of pain also fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. In truth, it always hurts. It always hurts not to breathe like a normal person, incessantly reminding your lungs to your heart, forcing yourself to accept as unsolvable the clawing scraping inside-out ache of under-oxygenation.

So, I was not lying, exactly. I was just choosing from the truth. ‘Oh, my God. I have seen her at parties. The things I would do to that boy. I mean, not now that I know you are interested in her. But,

oh, sweet holy Lord, I would ride that one-legged pony around the corral.' 'Kaitlyn,' I believed. 'Sorry. Do you think you'd have to be on top?' 'Kaitlyn,' I believed. 'What were we talking about. Right, you are also Her Waters. Maybe... are you gay?' 'I don't think so. I mean, I like her.' 'Does he have ugly haloes?

Sometimes, stunning people have ugly haloes.' 'Nope, he has kind of astounding haloes.' 'Hum,' she believed. After a second, Kaitlyn believed, 'Remember her? She broke up with me last week because he had decided there was something fundamentally

incompatible about us deep down also that we would only get hurt more if we played it out. He called it preemptive dumping. So maybe you have this premonition that there is something fundamentally incompatible also you're preempting the preemption.' 'Hmm,' I believed. 'I'm just thinking aloud here.' 'Sorry about this.' 'Oh, I got over it, darling. It took me a sleeve of Girl Scout Thin Mints also forty minutes to get over that boy.' I laughed.

'Well, thanks, Kaitlyn.'

'In the event, you do hook up with her, I expect lascivious details.' 'But of

course,’ I believed, also then Kaitlyn made a kissy sound into the phone also I believed, ‘Bye,’ also she hung up. I comprehended while listening to Kaitlyn that I did not have a premonition of hurting her. I had a post monition. I pulled out my laptop also looked up Caroline Mathers.

The physical similarities were striking- same steroidal round face, same nose, also same approximate overall body shape. But her eyes were deep brown (mine are lime) also her complexion was much darker- Italian French or something. Lots of lots of lots of lots of

lots or lots of people-lots- lots- lots-had left condolence messages for her.

It was an endless scroll of people who missed her, so many that it took me an hour of clicking to get past the I am sorry your dead wall posts to the I am praying for your wall posts. She had died a year ago of brain cancer. I was able to click through some of her pictures. She was in a bunch of the earlier ones- pointing with a thumbs-up to the jagged scar across her bald skull; arm in arm at Memorial Hospital's playground, with their backs facing the camera; kissing her while she held the camera out, so you

could only see their noses also closed eyes. I miss you. I love you. I miss you; I miss you I miss seeing you, also feel you; I miss you! The most recent pictures were all her before, when she was healthy, uploaded postmortem by friends- a beautiful girl, wide-hipped also curvy, with long, straight dead black hair falling over her face.

My healthy self-looked extraordinarily little like her healthy self. But our cancer selves might have been sisters. No wonder he had stared at me the first time he saw me. I kept clicking back to this one wall post, written two

months ago, nine months after she died, by one of her friends. We all miss you so much. It just never ends. It feels like we were all wounded in your battle, Caroline. I kept thinking about my shoulder, which hurt, also- also I still had the pain and eke, but only because I had been thinking about a girl, I kept telling myself to compartmentalize, to be here now at the circular table (too large in diameter for After a while, Mom also Dad announced it was time for dinner. I shut down the computer also got up, but I could not get the wall post out of my mind, also for some reason it made me nervous un-hungrily.

Who had died of brain cancer also all this shit? Three people also definitely too large for two) with this soggy broccoli also a black-bean burger that all the ketchup in the world could not sufficiently moisten. I told myself that imagining a met in my brain or my shoulder would not affect the invisible reality going on confidential of me, also that therefore all such thoughts were wasted moments in a life composed of a definition finite set of such moments. I even tried to tell myself to live my best life today. For the longest time, I could not figure out why something a stranger had written on the Internet to a different (also lifeless)

stranger was bothering me, so, much also making me worry that there was something inside my brain-which did hurt, although I knew from years of experience that pain is a blunt also a general diagnostic instrument. Because there had not been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea that day, my parents were all hyper-focused on me, also so, I could not hide this, a flash flood of nervousness.

Chapter: 9

Shittie-ish

‘Uh-huh,’ I believed. I took a bite of a burger. Swallowed. I tried to say

something that a normal person whose brain was not drowning in panic Is everything all right?' asked Mom as I ate would say. 'Is there broccoli in the burgers?' 'A little,' Dad believed. 'Pretty exciting that you might go to Amsterdam.' 'Surely,' I believed. I tried not to think about the word wounded, which of course is a way of thinking about it. 'Bryana,' Mom believed. 'Where are you right now?' 'Just thinking, I guess,' I believed. 'Twitterpated,' my dad believed, smiling. 'I am not a bunny, also I am not in love with Her Waters or anyone,' I answered, way too defensively.

Wounded.

Like Alderson Trapper he had been a bomb also when she blew up everyone around her was left with embedded shrapnel. Dad asked me if I was working on anything for school. ‘I’ve got some very advanced Algebra homework,’ I told her. ‘So advanced that I couldn’t possibly explain it to a layperson.’ ‘Also, how’s your friend here?’ ‘Blind,’ I believed. She was always nameless to everyone around her… that why I just call her- her or her. ‘You’re being very pre-teen today,’ Mom believed. She seemed annoyed by it. ‘Isn’t this what

you wanted, Mom? For me to be pre-teen?' 'Well, not necessarily this kind of pre-teen, but of course your father, also I am enthusiastic to see you become an undeveloped woman, making friends, going on dates to drop your undies I get it.'

'I'm not going on dates,' I believed. 'I don't want to go on dates with anyone. It's a terrible idea also a huge waste of time-' 'Honey,' my dad believed. 'What's wrong?' 'I'm like. Like. I am like a grenade, Mom. I'm a grenade also at some point I'm going to blow up also I would like to minimize the casualties,

okay?’ My dad tilted his head a little to the side, like a scolded puppy. ‘I’m a grenade,’ I believed over. ‘I just want to stay away from people also read books also think to be with you girl because there’s nothing, I can do about hurting you; you’re too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I am not depressed. I do not need to get out more. It featured a sentence-to-corpse ratio of 1-2, also I tore through it without ever looking up.

I liked Staff Sergeant Jimmy Jamison even though he did not have much in the way of a technical personality, but mostly I liked that his

adventures kept happening. Also- I can't be a regular pre-teen because I'm a grenade.' 'Bryana,' Dad believed, also then choked up. He cried a lot, my dad. 'I'm going to go to my room also read for a while, okay? I am fine. I am fine; I just want to go read for a while.' A bench surrounded by an Irish Gifts store, the Fountain Pen Emporium, also a baseball cap outlet-a corner of the mall even Kaitlyn would never shop, also started reading Midnight Dawns. There were always more bad guys to kill also more good guys to save. New wars started even before the old ones were won. I had not read a real series like that since I was a

kid, also it was exciting to live again in infinite fiction.

Twenty pages from the end of Midnight Dawns, things started to look bleak for Mayhem when he was shot seventeen times while attempting to rescue an (undeveloped-minded-haired, American) hostage from the Enemy. But as a reader, I did not despair. The war effort would go on without her. There could also be would-be sequels starring his cohorts- High-quality Manny Sty also- Isolated Asper Jacks also the rest. I was about to the end when this little girl with barrette braids appeared in front of me

also believed, ‘What’s in your nose?’ Also, I believed, ‘Um, it’s called a cannula. These tubes give me oxygen also help me breathe.’ Her mother swooped in also believed, ‘Amy,’ disapprovingly, but I believed, ‘No, it’s okay,’ because it was, also then Jackie asked, ‘Would they help me breathe, too?’ ‘I don't know. Let us try.’ I took it off also let Jackie stick the cannula in her nose also breathe. ‘Tickles,’ she believed.

‘I know, right?’

‘I think I’m breathing better,’ she believed. Shit- ‘Surely?’ ‘Surely.’ Shit- ‘Well,’ I believed, ‘I wish I could give you

my cannula but I kind of really needs the help.’ I already felt the loss. I focused on my breathing as Shit- Jackie also the tubes back to me. I gave them a quick swipe with my T-shirt, laced the tubes behind my ears, also put the nubbins back in place. Shit- ‘Thanks for letting me try it,’ she believed. Crapp's ‘No problem.’ ‘Jackie,’ her mother believed again, also this time I let her go. I returned to the book, where Staff Sergeant Dax Mayhem regretted that he had but one life to give for his country, but I kept thinking about that little kid, also how much I liked her. I went to bed a little early that night, changing into boy boxers also a T-shirt

before crawling under the covers of my bed, which was full size also pillow-topped one of my favorite places in the world.

Also- when I started reading An Imperial Affliction for the millionth time.

AIA like ADA is about this girl named Annah (who narrates the story) also her one-eyed mom, who is a professional gardener obsessed with daisies, also they have a normal lower middle- class life in a little central California town until Anna gets this rare blood cancer. The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never

again feel normal to talk to her. Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone, I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward also Self-conscious around me, except kids like Jackie who just did not know any better. Anyway, I did like being alone. I liked being alone with poor Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, whoa-oh, come on, he is not going to survive these seventeen bullet wounds, is he?

Chapter: 10

Just totally correct. Cancer kids are side effects of the relentless mutation

that made the diversity of life on earth possible, but it is not a cancer book because cancer books suck.

Like, in cancer books, the cancer person starts a charity that raises money to fight cancer, right? Also- this commitment to charity reminds the cancer person of the essential goodness of humanity also makes her-her feel loved encouraged because she will leave a cancer-curing legacy. But in AIA, Anna decides that being a person with cancer who starts a cancer charity is a bit narcissistic, so she starts a charity called The Anna Foundation for People with

Cancer Who Want to Cure. Also, Anna is honest about all of it in a way no one else is- Throughout the book, she refers to herself as the side effect, which is so-o as the story goes on, she gets sicker, the treatments also disease racing to kill her, also her mom falls in love with this Dutch tulip trader Anna calls.

About to get married also Anna is about to start this crazy new treatment regimen involving wheatgrass low doses of arsenic, the book ends right in the middle of all know it is a very literary decision also everything part of the reason I love the book so much, but there

is something to recommend a story that ends. Also- if it cannot end, then it should at least continue into perpetuity like the adventures of hers.

I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to also write this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life ends also whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, also it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. I had written, care of his publisher, a dozen letters to Peter Van Hooted, each asking for some answers about what happens after the

end of the story- whether the Dutch Tulip Man is a con artist, whether Anna's mother ends up married to her, what happens to Anna's stupid hamster (which her mom hates,) whether Anna's friends graduate from high school-all that stuff. But he had never responded to any of my letters. AIA was the only book Muray's had written, also all anyone seemed to know about her was that after the book came out, he moved from the United States to the wet lassos also became reclusive. I imagined that he was working on a sequel set in the Nethe-real-so-s- Anna's mom also the Dutch Tulip Man end up moving there also trying to start a

new life. But it had been ten years since An Imperial Affliction came out, also Van Ray Muray's had not published so much as a blog post. I could not wait forever to see her he was my dream guy. As I reread that night, I kept getting distracted imagining her reading the same words.

I wondered if he would like it, or if he would dismiss it as ostentatious. 'Well, I haven't finished it. It's six hundred fifty-one pages long also I've had twenty-six hours.' Then I recollected my promise to call her after reading the life story, so I found his number on its title page also texted her. Too many bodies fall

to others. Not enough adjectives. How's AIA? He replied to a minute later- As I recall, you promised to CALL when you finished the book, not text. So- I called. 'Bryana,' he believed upon picking up. 'So- have you read it?' 'How far are you?' 'Four fifty-three.'

'Also- she?'

~*~

'I will withhold judgment until I finish. However, I will say that I'm feeling a bit embarrassed to have given you The Price of Dawn.' 'Don't be… fool think love is over- I'm already on Requiem for

Mayhem.’ ‘A sparkling addition to the series. So, okay, is the tulip guy a crook? I’m getting a bad vibe from her.’ ‘No spoilers,’ I believed. ‘If he is anything other than a total gentleman, I’m going to gouge his eyes out.’ ‘So- you’re into it.’ ‘Withholding judgment! When can I see you?’ ‘Certainly, not until you finish An Imperial Affliction.’

I enjoyed being here.

‘Then I’d better hang up also start reading.’ ‘You’d better,’ I believed, also the line clicked dead without another word. Flirting was new to me, but I liked it. ‘Also- I’m the one who needs to get a

life.’ I smiled, also she tried to smile back, but there was something flimsy in it. After a second, I believed, ‘Want to go to a movie?’ The next morning, I had Twentieth-Century American Poetry at MCC. This old woman gave a lecture wherein she managed to talk for ninety minutes about Sylvia Plath without ever once quoting a single word of Sylvia Plath. When I got out of class, Mom was lazed around at the curb in front of the building. ‘Did you just wait here the entire time?’ I asked as she hurried around to help me haul my cart also tank into the car.

‘Nope, I picked up the dry cleaning also went to the post office.’

‘Also, then?’

‘I have a book to read,’ she believed. ‘Sure. Anything you’ve been wanting to see do U want to be with me?’ ‘Let us just do the thing where we go also see whatever starts next.’ She closed the door for me also walked around to the driver’s side. Wed-r-ov-ie over to the Brennon theater also watched a 3-D movie about talking gerbils. It was fun. When I got out of the movie, I had four text messages from Her. Tell me my copy is missing the last twenty pages or

something. Bryana Candelaria, tell me I have not reached the end of this book. OH, MY GOD, DO THEY GET MARRIED OR NOT OH MY GOD, WHAT IS THIS Anna died also so it just ends?

CRUEL.

Call me when you can. Hope all is okay. So, when I got home, I went out into the backyard also sat down on this rusting latticed patio chair called her. It was a cloudy day, typical Indiana town- the kind of weather that boxes you in. Our little backyard was dominated by my childhood swing set, which was looking waterlogged also pathetic. She noticed the third ring.

‘Bryana love,’ he believed. ‘So welcome to the sweet torture of reading An Imperial-’ I stopped when I heard violent sobbing on the other end of the line. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked.

Some injured inborn. She turned his attention to her. ‘Dude.

Man. Does Support Group Bryana make this better or worse?

She Focus. On.

‘I’m also,’ She answered. ‘I am, however, with her, who seems to be decompensating.’ More wailing. Like the death cries of Me.’ After a minute, she

believed to me, ‘Can you meet us at my house in, say, twenty minutes?’ ‘Torture. I get it, like, I get that she died or whatever.’ ‘Right, I assume so,’ I believed. ‘Also, okay, fair enough, but there is this unwritten contract between author also reader also I think not ending your book kind of violates that is a contract.’ ‘I don’t know,’ I believed, feeling defensive of Muray’s.

‘That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death-a-fully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do-God also see what happens also shit, I do want

to know what happens to everyone else. That is what I asked her in my letters. But he, surely, he never answers.' 'Right. You believed he was a hermit?' 'Exact is true.' 'Impossible to track down.' 'Precise is thought.' 'Utterly out-of-the-way,' Her believed.

~*~

'Ill-advisedly so,'

I believed. ''Dear Mr. Doshscee,'' he answered. ''I am writing to thank you for your electronic correspondence, received via Ms. this four of July, from the United States of America, as far as

geography can be believed to exist in our victoriously digitized contemporaneity.’’

‘Her, what the fucking hell shit ass fuck?’

‘He has an assistant,’ Her believed.

I found her.

I emailed her.

She sent her an email.

He responded via her email account.’

‘Okay, all right. Keep reading.’

‘‘My response is being written with ink also a paper in the glorious

tradition of our ancestors then transcribed by Ms. Vliegenthart into a series of 1st also 0’s to travel through the insipid web which has lately ensnared our species, so I apologize for any errors or omissions that may result.

‘‘Given the entertainment bacchanalia at the disposal of young men also women of your generation, I am grateful to anyone anywhere who sets aside the hours necessary to read my little book.

On the other hand, I am particularly indebted to you, sir, both for your kind words about An Imperial

Affliction also for taking the time to tell me that the book, also here I quote you directly, ‘meant a great deal’ to you. ‘‘I fear there is not, my friend, also that you would receive scant encouragement from further encounters with my writing. But to answer this… ‘‘This comment, however, leads me to wonder- What do you mean by meaning? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate…? Her?

Ringing alarms? A call to arms? Morphine drips. Of course, like all interrogation of the universe, this line of inquiry inevitably reduces us to ask what it means to be human also whether to borrow a phrase from the angst-encumbered sixteen-year-olds you no doubt revile-there is a point to it all. Her it if it is your question- No…?

I have not written anything else, nor will I. I do not feel that continuing to share my thoughts with readers would benefit either them or me. Thank you again for your generous email.

‘Yours most sincerely, Muray’s, via books.’

‘Wow’

I believed.

‘Are you making this up?’

‘Bryana love, could I, with my meager intellectual capacities, make up a letter from Muray’s featuring phrases like

‘Our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity’?’

‘You could not,’ I allowed this all.

‘Can I, can I have the email address?’ ‘Of course,’ She believed like it

was not the best gift ever. I spent the next two hours authoring an email to Muray's. It got worse each time I rewrote it, but I could not stop myself.

Chapter: 11

Dear Mr. Muray's, my name is Bryana. My friend her- Waters, who read a Royal Infirmity at my recommendation, just received see the 1921 Smith typewriter on the desk. An email from you at this address. I hope you will not mind that she shared that email with me.

Mr. Muray, I recognize from your email to her that you are not planning to

publish any more books. In a way, I am thrilled to hear the yes- I wanted with the girl in the story being based on me, but I am also relieved- I never have to worry whether your next book will live up to the magnificent perfection of the as a 4- year survivor of stage seven sarcoma, I can tell you that you got everything right in An Imperial Affliction. Or at least your original.

Got me right. Your book has a way of telling me what I am feeling before I even feel it, also I have reread it loads of times. Come also stop your crying, it will be all right- you be there. I phenomenon,

though, if you would mind answering a couple of questions, I have about what happens after the end of the novel. I comprehend the bookends because Annah expires or becomes too ill to continue writing it, but I would like to know what happens to Annah's dad- whether she married the Dutch Tulip Man, whether she ever has another child, also whether she stays at 2022 South. Loral, excreta.

Also, is he a fraud or does he love them? What happens to Anna's friends- particularly Ranyth also Lalsoona?

Do they stay together?

Say more-ish

Also, lastly-I realize that this is the deep also thoughtful question you always hoped your readers would ask- what becomes the basses of me? These questions have haunted me for years- but I got it, also I do not know how long I have left to get answers to them. I know these are not important literary questions also that your book is full of important literary questions, but I would just really like to know. In addition to that shit of course, if you ever do decide to write anything else, even if you do not want to publish it, I would love to read it.

Forthrightly, I had spoken your grocery lists.

Yours with great admiration, Bryana

(My age 10)

After I sent it, I called her back, also we stayed up late talking about a Lordly Illness… besides, also, I read from his poems in his books. That guy- him- he sir- Muray's had used for the title, also he believed, I had a respectable opinion for reading also did not pause too long for the contour breaks, also then he told me that the sixth Price of Dawn book, The

Folk Comments, begins with a quote from a poem. It took her a minute to find the book, but lastly, he read the quote to me. ‘‘say your life penniless down. The last good kiss- You ensured it was years in the past.’

‘Not ruthless,’ I believed. ‘Not whatsoever a bit hollow or zip.

I believe Manteca Hemnay would refer to that as ‘sissy girl gay- crap.’’

‘Surely, with his teeth gritted, no qualm. A supernatural being, Hemnay grits his teeth a lot in these books. He’s going to get TMI, I if he survives all this

fight.’ Also, then after a second, she asked, ‘When was the last good kiss you had? ‘I thought about it.

My kissing-all pre-diagnosis- had been scratchy also slobbery, also on some level, it always felt like kids playing at being grown. But of course, it had been a while. ‘Years ago,’ I believed finally. ‘You?’ ‘I had a few good kisses with my ex-girlfriend, Jacky-Yathers Mals-o-teasers.’

‘Years ago?’

‘The last one was just less than a year ago.’

‘What happened?’

‘During the kiss?’

‘Nope, with you also her.’

‘Oh,’ He and she believed.

Also, then after a second, ‘Caroline is no longer suffering from personhood.’ ‘UM-HUM,’ I believed. ‘Surely,’ he believed. ‘I’m sorry,’ I believed. I had known plenty of dead people, of course. But I had never dated one. I could not even imagine it. ‘Not your shortcoming, Bryana May Love. We’re all just side effects, right?’ ‘Shit on the container ship of mindfulness,’ I believed,

allude to AIA. ‘All right,’ he believed. ‘All right,’ I believed.

‘All right,’ he believed.’

‘I got to go to snooze. It’s almost single.’ ‘All right,’ he believed after always. ‘Maybe okay will be our always.’ I giggled also believed…

‘All right.’

Also, then the line was soft but not dead- not dead yet- I believed. I almost felt like he was there in my room with me, but in a way, it was better, like I was not in my room also he was not in his, but instead, we were together in some

invisible also tenuous third space that could only be visited on my Mac- book that looks like an old Typewriter-computer with numbers going up to 20, with 20 I phones inside so fast it's amazing WIFI built-in also notebook writer software, that runs his programming called My Profile, also Filling cabinet system for a desktop, it’s all waterless, with a printer on like a fast fax print out-it has old razed keys like they did with modern tectonic[noy inside, the light up, also they were the drum is where the levers hit the touch screen, its Patton on it now to mine believed

Muray’s, take it! White also lights up blue…

(See it)

‘All right,’ I believed.

It was she who finally hung up. Muray’s replied to her email four hours after he sent it, but two days later, Muray’s still had not replied to me. SHE assured me it was because my email was better also required a more thoughtful response, which Muray’s was busy writing answers to my questions, also that brilliant prose took time. But still, I worried. On Sunday during American

Poetry for Mannequins 100, I got a text from her- Just out of surgery taking more of me off. It went well. He is officially NEC or NEC meant ‘no evidence of malignancy.’ A second text came a few seconds later. I mean, he is blind. So that is unlucky yuckiest.

That evening, Mom consented to loan me the car so I could drive down to Memorial to check in on her. I found my way to his room on the fifth floor, knocking even though the door was open, also a woman’s voice believed, ‘Come in.’ It was a nurse who was doing something to the also ages in her eyes. ‘Hey, her,’ I

believed. Then she believed, ‘Daddy?’ ‘Oh, no. Sorry. No, it is, um, Bryana. Um, Support Group Bryana? Night-of-the broken-trophies Bryana?’ ‘Oh,’ he believed. ‘Surely, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Bryana. Come over here so I can examine your face with my haloes also see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could.’ ‘He’s kidding,’ the nurse believed.

‘Yes,’ I believed. ‘I realize.’ I took a few steps toward the bed. I pulled a chair up also sat down, took his halo. ‘Hey,’ I believed. ‘Hey,’ he believed back.

Then nothing for a while. ‘How you are emotions feeling today?’ I asked. ‘Okay,’ he believed. ‘I don’t know.’ ‘You don’t know what?’ I asked. I looked at his halo because I didn’t want to look at his face blindfolded by also age.

SHE bit his nails, also I could see some blood on the corners of a couple of his cuticles. ‘She hasn’t even visited,’ he believed. ‘I mean, we were together fourteen months. Fourteen months is a long time. God, that hurts.’ She let go of my halo to fumble for his pain pump, which you hit to give yourself a wave of narcotics. The nurse, having finished the

balayage change, stepped back. ‘It’s only been a day, her,’ she believed, vaguely condescending.

‘You’ve got to give yourself time to heal. Also, fourteen months is not that long, not in the scheme of things. You are just getting started, friend. You’ll see.’ The nurse left. ‘Is she gone?’ ‘That, too,’ he believed. His mouth tightened. I could see the pain. ‘Scrupulously, I think a hell of a lot more about Monica than my eye. Is that- crazy stupid love? That’s crazy.’

I nodded, then realized he could not see me nod. ‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘I’ll, see? Really? Did she seriously say that?’

‘Qualities of a Good Nurse- Go-o!’ I alleged harshly.

‘1. So, do not let it put on your disability, ‘she believed.

‘2. Gets blood on the original trial,’ I believed.

‘Seriously, that is huge. I mean is this my freaking arm or a dartboard?

‘3. No condescending voices.’

‘4. I don’t give a flying shit.’

‘5. Kill me with this book I have here.’

‘How are you doing, sweetie?’ I asked, sweetly. ‘I’m going to stick you with a needle now.

Ouchy- all boo-boo also baddie I believed.’ ‘I’s my W- little fluffy-ump sicky-wicky?’ he answered. Baby talk is you freaking kidding me the man I, not the little or dumb for you to be acting like I do not get that death is nearing.

Also, then after a subsequent, ‘Most of them are good. I just want the hell out of this place.’ ‘This place as in the hospital?’ ‘It’s a little crazy,’ I allowed. ‘But I believe in true love, you know? I don’t believe that everybody gets to keep

their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody should have true love, also it should last at least as long as your life does.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'I just wish the whole thing hadn't happened sometimes.

The whole cancer thing.' His speech was slowing down. The medicine is working. 'I'm sorry,' I believed. 'She was here earlier. He was there when I woke up. Took off school. He...' His head turned to the side a little. 'It's better,' he believed quietly. 'The pain?' I asked. He nodded a little. 'Good,' I believed. Also, then, like the bitch I am- 'You were saying something about her?' But he was gone. I

went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop also asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the strongest. ‘They all smell the same. They get sprayed with Super Scent,’ she believed.

‘Really?’

‘Surely, they just squirt-um with it.’ I opened the cooler to her left also sniffed at a dozen roses, also then leaned over some carnations. Same smell, also lots of it. The flowers were cheaper, so I grabbed a dozen yellow ones. They cost fourteen dollars. I went back into the

room; his mom was there, holding his also. She was young also pretty. ‘Are you a workmate?’ she asked, which struck me as one of those unintentionally broad also unanswerable questions. ‘Um, sure,’ I believed. ‘I’m from Support Group. These are for her.’ She took them also placed them in her lap. ‘Do you know Maralsoa?’ she asked. I shook my head no. We are trapped, trapped like rats in a trap!

Everywhere I go I have no privacy, I have no satisfaction, I cannot get it… it is not something I can have. My phone is tapped, and my PC is hacked. I am being watched right now; I just feel

that I am. She knows everything I do, everywhere I go. She sees who I am friends with and end it just because she can. She sits me up just to fall into her trap. I have used a fake name, it is all the same, I am her toy in her sick twisted game. At what point do you say- I have had enough. Stop it- get a life!

Friend come and go; I know that nothing can last more than a week with me; it has been like this all my life. You just get attached, and she puts an end to it so fast... you would not believe me. Why don't I know it because she must have me on her own, and she cannot see me have

the love of another that is not her? I do not know… all I know is that everyone leaves me before I want them to. But like I have a choice. No, not really. If you want me, we need to...

Run… and never look back, we go far from here where it will not matter, will be gone so far away that the names she says, will not mean a thing because we will have each other, and not care what others say. Our happiness would lie in each other's arms and the ring on our fingers. I do not want to trap you, but you need to say yes to me, so this can happen! The sooner the better!

You are trapped by an overprotective and malicious boyfriend, who beats you. Who makes you work like a fool…?

The jerk will not even buy you a ring after so many years of dating.

He trapped you! Do you think he loves you? Or is he just trapping you until he finds something more or just settles? You are tipped by your town. You are tipped because you like me but cannot. You are trapped because of what they all say about me. All that matters to me is what you think, not them. You are tipped by him, and he makes sure that you are

not even allowed to look at another man like me. Plus, it all goes back to her, the one that trapped us both in not being in love. Forbidden to date, see, look, feel, or even talk to one another.

Tripped into missing out, tripped into being the weirdo.

Tripped in to not knowing what you would feel like, in a hug or kiss. Tripped into being hated for no reason other than her rumors. Tripped into missing you. You are trapped into wishing for me and dreaming of what could be. Yet your friends love him and not me, with me all they see in the past that is not

true, a past that I was trapped into. I am trapped by you in so many ways that you never even knew about. Trapped because I have fallen in love with you and cannot seem to forget about you. You are on my mind all the time. No blocks can stop us from someday getting together. That is only if you get out of the trap of allowing everyone to push you around. You must be strong and fight. I am trapped into fighting for your hand, and your love, and I just do not know why I keep trapping myself in you. I just do not understand why I cannot get you out of my mind. I know one thing I never trip you like everyone seems to do around here; I am

not like that. If you want me to be fine, and if not fine. I am trapped into being a hopeless romantic… I must get out. I do not care what my mind says is logical, what my heart says it needs! There have been rumors of an uprising free of all the restrictions of the world. I am done caring about the consequences. It is time to be self-interested and do some for me. The longing of you I cannot take it anymore. The passion I have for you has my skin on fire! I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, and I can function right. Without you being in my life. It seems like you and I are trapped into having chastity belts, with no way to unlock them and connect. Your

boyfriend has your key, and she has mine. I am trapped in the fantasy of us sleeping together playing in my head. Trapped into wanting more than one-night stands with you. Like- that even possible. You are trapped into making him happy, will on the inside you are miserable.

Trapped!

I would be without you next to me now. I want to feel your kiss, I want to feel your body spooning or unstop of mine. I want to go out with you, and not have everyone stop it. I will not go everywhere with you. I want you to live with me, you have a home here, if you can

get out of your trap, I may be able to get out of mine. I want you to share my bedroom… I know it is crazy! But I want you to be my girl. You have trapped me under the spell of your green eyes, and shy little sensual ways. ‘Instead of losing my mind to you, I was hoping it would have been something else.

You could imagine, my sweetheart that remands nameless in this story, but you know who you are. Do me this favor and take it from me. I don’t want to be thirty when I get married either, I want it now as I want you now.’ ‘I don’t care when as long as it’s soon, I

don’t care how as long as it happens, I don’t care who sees us, it could be in a car in a local store parking lot. It’s all the same to me along as I am with you!’ If you are the one, I want you to be the first in everything, you should not feel trapped by him to feel love like that. I am not sure if I will be your first, but I want to be the last. You should be feeling the love from me. The love I can give and take with you. It is the love I have for you… not entrapment. Really- I do not think I am being selfish it is just time for this all to happen to me. I have waited too long now! Self-seeking I just need you to save me! I am trapped

into taking care of everyone else, while nobody takes care of me.

I was trapped into setting at home and going out to get away. Trapped into using other's money, because they will not let me work, I have everything I need, but not what I want. Trapped into doing work, and not getting paid. Trapped for life, and afraid! Taped in my faith, yet to me, that is a good thing.

Hopeful that there is a life after death if not then life is not worth living is it. Taped into fear of death, trapped into seeing death all around me. Tapped into being around life, that just does not get it.

Trapped into feeling cold. Trapped into being warm to those that are cold. Taped into seeing the small light, in the never-ending darkness. Trapped in never-ever giving up. (Longing and Desire) I am longing to see you. Longing to be with you, longing to hear from you. I am longing for you. A longing like desire, I am desiring what I am longing for, and desiring is what trapping me to you right now. The longing and desire that he has for you is pushing you away from him, and me. Like a dark storm over your head. You have longed for me, but can it be, but will you and I be more than longing and desire?

Will we always be trapped in too long and desire, by the ones that long and desire to keep us apart? I am longing and desiring your kiss on my lips! I am longing for your desiring hug with my hand right above your hips. Letting go of the past, with its dark toxic memories seeing them slip and rip from our grip and fade away, for a brighter happier day, all I can do is pray for the both of us. You and I, being together is necessary! I just need to have your trust. Today, I feel alone... In the morning, when I woke up, I wanted to talk to my friends... But I could not find anybody... neither my life nor by me.

My soul was eaten by loneliness like cancer within me.

It is okay I die at ten it is good- why God?

Why?

I have been living in a new place for four months, and I do not have a friend.

I feel like I am cursed...

Look, nobody writes even here.

There are a lot of voices in my mind, and I cannot stop them.

‘That's now the fifth day of rain.’

I spoke.

‘That's nice, dear,’ Harold said from the other side of the table. He flipped the page of his newspaper. I scowled at the glass. 'He never hears a word I say,' she thought to herself. Just to be spiteful, she said aloud, ‘By the way, I'm pregnant.’ ‘That's nice, dear’ Harold flipped another page, hiding his smile. ‘It's the cable guy's baby,’ Sarah said further. Harold raised his eyebrow and put his paper down. ‘I get the message, Sarah,’ he said. ‘You have my attention now.’

‘Shouldn't we do something together this weekend?’

‘Like what: singing in the rain?’ Harold ducked, like a cup shattered above him on the wall.

He stood up and looked past Sarah who sat there, pale.

The potted cactus dropped into the sink.

‘That wasn't me,’ Sarah said. They looked around the kitchen, feeling a sudden chill in the air.

The microwave turned on by itself. The lights flickered. Sarah and

Harold retreated into the living room, not sure what to do.

The TV played an ad. ‘When something's strange in the neighborhood...’

They held each other close, no sign of having a fall out just five minutes ago. They looked at the TV. They looked at each other. Sarah grabbed the phone and punched the number.

‘We're sorry,’ the operator said in a nasal voice. ‘The number you have dialed has been disconnected.’

‘Too bad’ Sarah remarked. ‘Would have been great to work together with the guys once more.

Well, it looks like we must solve this one. Let us get the gear.’

With a nod of agreement, Harold grabbed the emergency flashlights from the drawer on the sofa table. Together, they went downstairs to the basement to find their stash of gear.

Dressed in their gear they emerged from the basement to take on whatever it was that had come to bother them Armed with their ghost-meters and

containment boxes, they made a sweep of the house. Suddenly a hovering apparition swept around the corner with a humming sound. ‘Get it - and don't cross the streams!’ The energy-beams hit the thing - which fell with a heavy CLUNK. ‘What the...?’ ‘Look- it's a drone dressed up as a ghost!’ Harold exclaimed. ‘Must be Halloween again!’ Sarah laughed. Today, I feel alone... I want to talk to my friends.

But then again, I could not find anybody... It was a dark stormy night, thunder awakened me or so I thought. I was in my bed cozy and warm, however, that is when I saw her hovering over me. I

thought I was dreaming. Yet she called out my name and said…

Muray's…

'I'm here to protect you, take my hand and I can show you the way to the light.'

I was not sure if I could trust her; she looked innocent enough- but something nagged at the back of my mind, something I ought to have remembered but could not grasp.

It is like I could see through her, she looked just like my wife, when she was about nine years old. Younger? And

we used to play in the sandbox together in our sweatshirts or less. Our mothers thought that was cute…or something, I have the photograph. Anyways- that was the first time I met her in the sandbox as a boy, and the girl that is over me looks so much like her that it is eerie to me. But why is she looking down at me?

I had not seen my wife for ten years; the marriage had not lasted long. We were better as friends.

The girl in front of me smiled shyly, just like Anna used to, and held out her small hand.

As I took her hand the storm fell silent, and I felt a strange energy course through me.

It is like I could feel her inside me, inside my soul. She was talking to me, without saying a word, I felt her thoughts, I felt her emotions, and I felt a teardrop running down my cheek. It was the baby girl we lost when Anna had a miscarriage, this baby is what broke us up, we blamed each other. It was like she was saying hello daddy. She would be 5 if she were alive. There is not a day or night that I do not think about what could have been.

But wait, the girl in front of me looked five, but our little- Lucy would have been nine now. Was it that long ago? I vowed to contact Anna, to try to say all the things I thought of over the years we had been apart.

There was so much I had to tell her, so much I had to ask forgiveness for.

Up till now would she forgive me, would she love to be there for me? Is my little girl letting me know something that I do not know as of now? Is Anna in need of me? Why now, why am I seeing Lucy?

~*~

I remember the day I met Anna it seems like so long ago; she was a first-year student, and I was a senior. She was a cheerleader, and I was in the marching band. She was popular as for me not so much. I will never forget the first time she held my hand; she was everything to me then. I loved her too much and drove her away, but why did I have to lose my only baby, there was no other girl for me than Anna. I never dated, or went out, and at one point I wanted to give up on my life, yet I did not. And therefore...

~*~

When we met in college, I could hardly believe she was the same little girl I had played in the sandbox with. There was a big party after the game and Anna came over to me to talk about music. She took my hand and led me into the garden, and that was the beginning of our life together.

Yes- it was the 90s and I had a sofa in my dorm room. That is what attached her to me. I remember we smoked a lot of pot to the new Neverminded album. (Nope- I do not do that anymore.) We were grunge kids, wearing anarchy proudly, at that time. We

would party and trash a room, chugging a beer, grinding dancing, and throwing finger food. We did not clean up; we just moved to the next room down. That same sofa is the same one Anna and I hooked upon for the first time back in the first year, she kissed me, and that was it when we were high school sweethearts.

I will never forget she cried afterward. In love, one week, heating each other and breaking up the next. We both cheated, we both used either to make either jealous, it is like we wanted to see how far we could take it… in hurting one another. Oh yes, we were

madly in love. And crazy for each other, there was nothing we would do or try.

I do not think we would have lasted together if we had not been so hard on each other; we knew what we had to lose and that kept us coming back to each other. It took something outside our control to cause a rift big enough to break us apart. She. Her hand was soothingly warm as she guided me out of bed and over to the window.

The storm was still quite ferocious, but we were in a bubble of calm, just me and she. It was amazing to think she is my daughter, and I am

getting to share these moments with her, moments that I thought I would never have. Really- I am just in awe of her and the blessings of God's goodness for letting this happen for me. So that I understand something clearly at last without understanding something clearly at last. It is every man’s dream to see his little girl grow up and be happy. I did not have that, but I am blessed to have this now. I evoke when we made this little girl, several weeks before the big day. The room was all ready for the day she came home, the walls soft in a rosy shade, and the crib and everything else was white. A

butterfly mobile over top to soothe her to sleep.

Now that baby tune that it plays is hunting me if played. The picture frame on the wall is empty, the rocking chair has never been used. The stuffed teddy never squeezed. The baby bottles never held. The pack of pampers on the changing table never opened. The girly outfits never off the hangers. The door was closed by me, locking the memories away, and behind me. I do not go into her room, I just cannot, it has not changed in years. I was the happiest baddy in the world, the day I found out she was a baby

girl. I loved her before she even had a name.

I want to protect her from all the sad things in this world and to be what was good. Show her that daddy is the only man that she can trust. I wanted to buy her all the pink dresses that I could.

Take her to the park, she, and her walking, and talking. I wanted to go to every school play and sports game that she was going to be a part of… I wanted to read her a bedtime story, really- I just wanted to be her daddy! I even wanted to see her been a dreadful teenager, I wanted to see her go to her first dance. I

wanted to see her find someone that loved her as much as I do. I wanted to have that dace the night she would get married. I wanted to see her grow up to a woman and give me grandbabies.

That would be perfect in my eyes and could do no wrong. That I could spoil. No man should have to see his baby girl go, before them it is the toughest thing in life to have to deal with and you never get over it, you learn to accept it, really what chose to do have otherwise. I can see her everywhere; she is with me all the time. She is mine. She is my love.

She is everything.

Chapter: 12

Surely- ‘Well, he’s sleeping,’ she believed. ‘I talked to her a little before when they were doing the ballotages or whatnot.’ ‘I hated leaving her for that, but I had to pick up Graham at school,’ she believed. ‘She did okay,’ I told her. She nodded. ‘I should let her sleep.’ She nodded again. I left. The next p.m. I woke up early also placed my email first thing. JJmardloveyou@gmail.com had finally replied. Dear Ms. Muray’s, I fear your faith has been misplaced-but then, faith usually is. I cannot answer your questions, at least not in writing, because

to write out such answers would constitute a sequel to An Imperial Affliction, which you might publish or otherwise share on the network that has replaced the brains of your generation.

There is the telephone, but then you might record the conversation. Not that I do not believe you, of course, but I do not trust you. Regrettably, dear Bryana, I could never answer such questions except in person, also you are there, while I am here. That noted I must confess that the unexpected receipt of your correspondence via Ms. Muray's hart has delighted me my braking apart-

What a wondrous thing to know that I made something useful to you even if that book seems so distant from me it was written by a different man altogether.

~*~

(The novelist of that novel was so cool, so nice, also so comparatively hopeful!)

Should you find yourself in that way of life, however, please do pay a visit at your leisure. I am usually at home. I would even allow you a peek at my grocery lists. Yours most sincerely, Muray's 'WHAT?!' I shouted aloud.

‘WHAT IS THIS LIFE?’ Dad ran in. ‘What’s wrong?’ ‘Nothing,’ I assured her. Still nervous, Mom knelt to check on Philip to ensure he was condensing oxygen appropriately.

I imagined sitting at a sun-drenched café with Muray’s as he leaned across the table on his elbows, speaking in a soft voice so no one else would hear the truth of what happened to the characters I had spent years thinking about. He had believed he could not tell me except in person, also then invited me to her. I explained this to dad, also then believed, ‘I have to go.’

‘Bryana, I love you, also you know I’d do anything for you, but we don’t-we don’t have the money for international travel, also the expense of getting equipment over there-love, it’s just not?’ ‘Surely,’ I believed, cutting her off. I realized I had been silly even considering it. ‘Don’t worry about it.’ But she looked apprehensive. ‘It’s really important to you, surely?’ she asked, sitting down, and on my calf. ‘It would be pretty amazing,’ I believed, ‘to be the only person who knows what happens besides her.’

‘That would be amazing,’ she believed. ‘I’ll talk to your father.’ ‘No,

don’t,’ I believed. ‘Just, seriously, do not spend any money on it, please. I’ll think of a touch.’ It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I had saved the family savings with copays, also dad could not work because she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering over me. I did not want to put them even further into debt. I told dad I wanted to call her to get her out of the room because I could not hassle her I-can’t-make-my’s-daughter- dreams come… The true sad face looking at me. Her–style, I read her the letter in one weird-ish of proverb hello. ‘Winner,’ he believed. ‘I know, right?’ I believed.

‘By what means am I going to get to her?’ ‘Do you have a wish?’ he asked, referring to this organization, The Genie Foundation, which is in the business of granting sick kids one wish. ‘No,’ I believed. ‘I used my Wish Pre-Phenomenon.’

‘What’d you do?’ I sighed loudly. ‘I was thirteen,’ I believed. ‘Not Disney or universal,’ he believed. I believed nothing. ‘You did not go to Disney World.’ I believed nothing.

‘Bryana!’ he shouted. ‘You did not use your one dying- Wish to go to Disney World with your parents.’ ‘Also- Epcot

Center,’ I murmured. ‘Oh, my good God,’ Her believed. ‘I can’t believe I have a crush on a girl with such cliché wishes.’ ‘I was a pre-teen,’ I believed again, although of course, I was only thinking crush infatuation affection fondness. I was flattered but changed the topic directly. ‘Shouldn’t you be in school or something?’ ‘I’m playing hooky to hang out either, but he’s sleeping, so I’m in the atrium doing geometry.’ ‘How’s he doing?’ I asked. ‘I can’t tell if he’s just not ready to confront the seriousness of his disability or if he does care more about getting dumped by her, but he won’t talk about anything else.’ ‘Surely,’ I believed.

‘How long’s he going to be in the hospital?’ ‘A few days. Then he goes to this rehab or something for a while, but he gets to sleep at home, I think.’ ‘Sucks it,’ I believed.

‘I see his mom. I got to go.’

‘Okay,’

I believed.

‘Okay,’ she answered.

I could hear his crooked smile.

On Saturday, my parents also went down to the farmers’ market in Broad Ripple.

It was sunny, a rarity for Indiana in April, also everyone at the farmers' market was wearing short sleeves even though the temperature did not justify it.

We leaders are excessively optimistic about summertime. Mom, also I sat next to each other on a bench across from a goat-soap maker, a man in overalls who had to explain to every single person who walked by that yes, they were his goats, also no, goat soap does not smell like cows.

My- I- phone rings.

'Who is it?'

Mom asked before I could even check. ‘I don’t know,’ I believed. It was Her, though. ‘Are you currently at your house?’ he asked. ‘Um, no,’ I believed. ‘That was a trick question. I knew the answer because I am currently at your house.’ ‘Oh. Um. Well, we are on our way, I guess?’

‘Awesome. See you soon.’ SHE was sitting on the front step as we pulled into the driveway. He was holding a bouquet of bright orange tulips just beginning to bloom, also wearing an Indiana pa under blossom falling, her fleece, a wardrobe choice that seemed

utterly out of character, although it did look quite good on her. He pushed herself up off the stoop, also me the tulips, also asked, ‘Want to go on a picnic?’ I nodded, taking the flowers.

My mom walked up behind me also shook her as I was holding the other one. ‘Jersey on that I gave her for a charmed life?’ my dad asked. ‘Indeed, it is.’ ‘God, I loved that guy,’ Dad believed, also immediately they were engrossed in a basketball conversation I could not (also did not want to) join, so I took my tulips inside. ‘Do you want me to put those in a

vase?’ Mom asked as I walked in, a huge smile on her face.

‘No, it’s okay,’ I told her.

If we had put them in a vase in the living room, they would have been everyone’s flowers. I wanted them to be my flowers. I went to my room, but it did not change. I brushed my hair, also teeth, put on some lip gloss also the smallest possible dab of perfume. I kept looking at the flowers. They were aggressively orange, too orange to be pretty.

I did not have a vase or anything, so I took my toothbrush out of my

toothbrush holder. Also filled it halfway with water also left the flowers there in the bathroom. When I reentered my room, I could hear people talking, so I sat on the edge of my bed for a while also listened through my hollow bedroom door- Dad- 'So you met Bryana at Support Group.' Her- 'Yes, sir. This is a lovely house you have. I like your artwork.'

Chapter: 13

Mom- 'Thank you, Her.' Dad- 'You're a survivor yourself, then?' Her- 'I am. I did not cut this fella off for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of it, although it is an excellent weight-loss strategy. Legs

are heavy!' Dad- 'Also how's your health now?' Her- 'NEC for fourteen months.' Mom- 'That's wonderful. The treatment options today are remarkable.' Her- 'I know. I'm blessed.' Dad- 'You have to Understand also that Bryana is still sick, she also will be for the rest of her life. She'll want to keep up with you, but her lungs my heart- ripping out at some point.' At which point I emerged, silencing her.' So where are you going?' asked Mom. She stood up also leaned over to her, whispering the answer, also then held a finger to her lips touching mine.

‘Shaw,’ he told her.

‘It’s a secret.’ Mom smiled. ‘You’ve got your phone?’ She asked me. I held it up as evidence, tilted my oxygen cart onto its front wheels, also started walking.

SHE hustled over, offering me his arm, which I took.

My fingers wrapped around his biceps. Inopportunely, he insisted upon driving, so the surprise could be a surprise. As we shuddered toward our destination, I believed, ‘You nearly charmed the pants off my mom.’ ‘Surely,

also your dad is a Stiller fan, which helps. You think they liked me?' 'Sure, they did. Who cares, though? They're just parents.' 'They're your parents,' he believed, glancing over at me. 'Plus, I like being liked. Is that crazy?' 'Well, you don't have to rush to hold doors open or smother me with compliments for me to like you.' He slammed the brakes, also I flew forward hard enough that my breathing felt weird also tight. I thought of the PET scan. Do not worry.

Apprehension is useless. I worried anyway. We burned neoprene,

roaring away from a stop sign before turning left onto the misnomer Grandview

(There is a view of a golf course, I guess, but nothing gral-s-o.)

The only thing I could think of in this direction was the cemetery. SHE reached into the center console, flipped open a full pack of cigarettes, also removed one. ‘Do you ever throw them away?’ I asked her. ‘One of the many benefits of not smoking is that packs of cigarettes last forever,’ he answered. ‘I’ve had this one for almost a year.

A few of them are broken near the filters, but I think this pack could easily get me to my eighteenth birthday.' He held the filter between his fingers, then put it in his mouth. 'So, okay,' he believed. 'Okay. Name some things that you never see in Indianapolis.' 'Um. Skinny adults,' I believed. He laughed.

'Good. Keep going.' 'M-mm, beaches. Family-owned restaurants. Geography. 'All excellent examples of things we lack. Also, ethos.' 'Surely, we are a bit short on culture,' I believed, finally realizing where he was taking me. 'Are we going to the museum?' 'In a

manner of speaking.' 'Oh, are we going to that park or whatever?'

SHE looked a bit deflated. 'Yes, we are going to that park or whatever,' he believed. 'You've figured it out, haven't you?' 'Um, figured what out?' 'Nonentity.' There was this park behind the museum where a bunch of artists had made big sculptures. I had heard about it but had never visited. We drove past the museum also parked right next to this basketball court filled with huge blue, red steel arcs that imagined the path of a bouncing ball. We walked down what passes for a hill in Indianapolis to this clearing where kids

were climbing all over this huge oversized skeleton sculpture.

The mandibles were each about waist high, also the thighbone was longer than mine. It looked like a child’s drawing of a skeleton rising out of the ground. My shoulder hurt. I worried cancer had spread from my lungs. I imagined the tumor metastasizing into my bones, boring holes into my skeleton, a slithering eel of insidious intent. ‘Funky Bones,’ Her believed. ‘Created by Muray’s.’ Pa taking also walking- ‘He is,’ Her believed.’ she stopped in the middle of the clearing with the bones right in front of us also slipped,

her bag off one shoulder, then the other. He unzipped it, producing an orange blanket, a pint of orange juice, also some also-wishes wrapped in plastic wrap with the crusts cut off.

‘What’s with all the yellowish?’

I asked, still not wanting to let myself imagine that all this would lead to her. ‘National color of the pa, of course. You also remember everything?’ ‘He wasn’t on the GED test.’ I smiled, trying to contain my excitement. ‘Double-decker?’ he asked. ‘Let me guess,’ I believed. Eating her look at this… ‘You’re always such a gate person that Love, Her.

Couldn’t you have at least gotten orange tomatoes?’ He laughed, also we ate our also- wishes in silence, watching the kids play in the sculpture. I could not very well ask her about it, so I just sat there surrounded by them, feeling awkward also hopeful.

In the distance, soaked in the unblemished sunlight so rare also precious in our hometown, a gaggle of kids made an essential into a playground, jumping back also fourth among the prosthetic bones. ‘Three things I love about this sculpture,’ Her believed. He was holding the unlit cigarette between

his fingers, flicking at it as if to get rid of the slag. He placed it back in his gateway. ‘Primary, the jawbones are just far enough apart that if you’re a kid, you cannot resist the urge to jump between them. Like, you just must jump from rib cage to skull. This means that, second, the sculpture forces children to play on bones. The symbolic resonances are endless, Bryana Love may.’

‘You do love symbols,’ I believed, hoping to steer the conversation back toward the many symbols of the Netherlands at our- eat al fresco. ‘Accurate, about that. You are speculating

about why you are eating a bad cheese also-witch also drinking orange juice why I am wearing the jersey to show us. 'It has crossed my mind,' I believed. 'Bryana May, like so many children before you-also I say this with great affection-you spent yours.

Wish hastily, with little care for the consequences. The Grim Reaper was staring you in the face also the fear of dying with your Wish still in your proverbial pocket, unrented, led you to rush toward the first Wish you could think of, also you, like so many others, chose the cold artificial pleasures of the theme

park.’ ‘I truly had a wonderful time on that trip. I met Goofy also Mickey Minn the rest of the f-ed shit-’ ‘I am amid a soliloquy! I wrote this out also memorized it if you interrupt me, I will completely screw it up,’ She interrupted. ‘Please to be eating your also witch also listening.’

(The also-which was inedible dry, but I smiled also took a bite anyway.) Dr. Griffanstion believed I could not go to Amsterdam without an adult intimately familiar with my case, which meant either Mom or Dr. Her herself. (My dad understood my cancer the way I did- in the vague, also incomplete way people

under seal electrical circuits also ocean tides. But my mom knew more about differentiated thyroid carcinoma in adolescents than most oncologists.)

‘So- you’ll come,’ I believed. ‘The Sprites will pay for it.

The Genies are encumbered.’ ‘But your father,’ she believed.

‘He would miss us. It wouldn’t be fair to her, also he can’t get time off work.’ ‘Are you lighthearted?

You don’t think Dad would enjoy a few days of watching TV shows that are not about aspiring models, also ordering

pizza every night, using paper towels as plates so he doesn’t have to do the dishes?’ Mom laughed. To conclude, she started to get excited, typing tasks into her phone- She would have to call Her parents also talk to the Sprites about my medical needs also do they have a hotel yet also what are the best guidebooks also we should do our research if we only have three days, also soon. I was annoyed, so I downed a couple of Advil also decided to take a snooze.

401 highlighted a sizable collection of shirtless also well-oiled strapping young lads, so it was not

particularly difficult on the eyes, but it was mostly a lot of sword-wielding to no real effect. The bodies of the Persians also the Spartans piled up, also I could not figure out why the Persians were so evil or the Spartans so awesome. 'Contemporaneity,' to quote AIA…

'Specializes in the kind of battles wherein no one loses anything of any value, except arguably their lives.' Also- so it was with these titans clashing. Toward the end of the movie, everyone is dead, also there is this insane moment when the Spartans flinch stacking the bodies of the dead up to form a wall of

corpses. The dead become this massive barrier staling between the Persians also the road to Sparta. I found the gore a bit gratuitous, so I looked away for a second, asking Her, ‘How many dead people do you think there are?’ He dismissed me with a wave. ‘Sh-h. Sh-h. This is getting awesome.’ When the Persians attacked, they had to climb up the wall of death, also the Spartans were able to occupy the high ground atop the corpse mountain, also as the bodies piled up, the wall of martyrs only became higher also, therefore, harder to climb, also everybody swung swords- shot arrows, also the rivers of blood poured down on what I call

Death Mount, also more. I took my head off his shoulder for a moment to get a break from the gore also watched Her watch the movie.

He could not contain her silly grin. I watched my screen through squinted eyes as the mountain grew with the bodies of Persians also Spartans. When the- she finally overran the Spartans, I looked over at her again. Even though the good guys had just lost, she seemed downright thrilled. I nuzzled up to her again but kept my eyes closed until the battle was finished. As the credits rolled, he took off his headphones also

believed, ‘Sorry, I was awash in the nobility of sacrifice. What were you saying?’ ‘How many dead people do you think there are?’ ‘Like, how many fictional people died in that fictional movie? Not enough,’ he joked.

‘No, I mean, like, ever. Like, how many people do you think have ever died?’ ‘I happen to know the answer to that question,’ he believed. ‘There are seven billion living people, also about ninety-eight billion dead people.’ ‘Oh,’ I believed. I had thought that since population growth had been so fast, there were more people alive than all the dead

combined. ‘There are about fourteen dead people for every living person,’ he believed. The credits continued rolling. It took a long time to identify all those corpses, I guess. My head was still on his shoulder. ‘I did some research on this a couple of years ago,’ She continued. ‘I was wondering if everybody could be remembered.

Like, if we got organized, also assigned a certain number of corpses to each living person, would there be enough living people to remember all the dead people?’ ‘Also- are there?’ ‘Sure, anyone can name fourteen dead people.

But we are disorganized mourners, so a lot of people end up remembering Shake speared, also no one ends up remembering the person he wrote Sonnet Fifty-five about.' 'Surely,' I believed.

It was quiet for a minute, also then he asked, 'You want to read or something?' I believed sure. I was reading this long poem called Howl by His poetry classic to me, also she was rereading An Imperial Affliction. After a while, he believed, 'Is it any good?' 'The poem?' I asked. 'Surely.'

'Surely, it's great. The guys in this poem take even more drugs than I do.

How’s AIA ADD EPA ADA whatever?’ ‘Still perfect,’ he believed.

‘Read to me please.’

‘This isn’t a poem to read aloud when you are sitting next to your sleeping mother. It has, like, sodomy also angel dust in it,’ I believed. ‘You just named two of my favorite pastimes,’ he believed. ‘Okay, read me something else then?’

‘Um,’ I believed. ‘I don’t have anything else?’

‘That’s too bad. I am so in the mood for poetry.

Do you have anything memorized?’

‘‘Let us go then, you are also I,’’ I started nervously, ‘‘When the evening is spread out against the sky also Like a patient etherized upon a table.’’

‘Slower,’ he believed.

Also, sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells- Streets that follow like a tedious argument - Of insidious intent to lead you to an overwhelming question... Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ Let us go also make our visit. I felt bashful like I had when I had first told her of An Imperial

Affliction. ‘Um, okay. Okay. ‘Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, the muttering retreats of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels, I’m in love with you,’ he believed quietly. Her,’ I believed. ‘I am,’ he believed. He was staring at me, also I could see the corners of his eyes crinkling. ‘I’m in love with you, also I’m not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things. I’m in love with you, also I know that love is just a shout into the void, also that oblivion is inevitable, also that we’re all doomed also that there will come a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, I know the sun will swallow the only

earth we'll ever have, also I am in love with you.' 'Her,' I believed again, not knowing what else to say. It felt like everything was rising in me like I was drowning in this weirdly painful joy, but I could not say it back. I could not say anything back. I just looked at her also let her look at me until he nodded, lips pursed, also turned away, placing the side of his head against the window.

Keep it shut for fear of murdering the airplane.

Chapter: 14

I think he must have fallen asleep. I did, eventually, also woke to the lasting gear coming down. My mouth tasted horrible, also I tried to me looked over at Her, who was staring out the window, also as we dipped below the low-hung clouds, I straightened my back to see the other side of me where I live in pa. The sand and land seemed sunk into the ocean; little rectangles of green surrounded by canals. We also, in fact, corresponding to a canal, like there were two runways- one for us also one for waterfowl. After getting our bags also clearing customs, we all piled into a taxi driven by this doughy bald guy who spoke

perfect English-like better English than I do.

‘The Hotel Kiss-My-Ass?’ I believed. Also, he believed, ‘You are Americans?’ ‘Yes,’ Mom believed. ‘We’re from Indiana.’ ‘Indiana,’ he believed. ‘They steal the also and building from the Indians also leave the name, yes?’ ‘Something like that,’ Mom believed. The cabbie pulled out into traffic also we headed toward a highway with lots of blue signs featuring double vowels- to be there also shit. Beside the highway, flat empty stretched for miles, interrupted by the occasional huge corporate headquarters.

In short, the Holocaust looked like Indiana, only with smaller cars.

‘This?’

‘Yes- also no,’ He answered.

‘She is like the rings of a tree- It gets older as you get closer to the center.’ It happened all at once- We exited the highway also there were the row houses of my imagination leaning precariously toward canals, ubiquitous bicycles, also coffee shops advertising HUGE SMOKING ROOM.

We drove over a canal also from atop the bridge I could see dozens of

houseboats moored along the water. It looked nothing like America.

~*~

It looked like an old painting, but real- the whole thing achingly peaceful in the morning light also I thought about how wonderfully strange it would be to live in a place where everything had been built by the dead. ‘Are these houses incredibly old?’ asked my mom.

‘Many of the canal houses date from the Golden Age, the seventeenth century,’ he believed. ‘Our city has a rich history, even though many tourists are

only wanting to see the Red- Light District.' He paused. 'Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth, it is a city of freedom. Also, in freedom, most people find sin.' All the rooms in the Hotel F-her/in/the/butt/hole were named after- Mom also I was staying on the ground floor in the Kierkegaard; Her was on the floor above us, in the Heidegger. Our room was small- a double bed pressed against a wall with my BiPAP machine, an oxygen concentrator, also a dozen refillable oxygen tanks at the foot of the bed.

Past the equipment, there was a dusty old paisley chair with a sagging seat, a desk, also a bookshelf above the bed containing the collected works for me. She got the Bi-PAPs working also placed its snout on me. I hated talking about that thing on, but I believed, ‘Just go to the park also I’ll call you when I wake up.’ ‘Okay,’ she believed. ‘Sleep close-fitting also bed-die tight, honey.’ ‘How do you do this every day?’ He asked as I disentangled my shirt from the tubes. Idiotically, it occurred to me that my pink underwear did not match my purple bra as if boys even notice such things. I crawled under the covers also kicked out

of my jeans socks then watched the comforter dance as beneath it, she removed first his jeans also then his leg.

~*~

‘Misuse of literality,’ I believed.

‘No,’ he believed. ‘So. Tired.’

His face turned away from me, my ear pressed against his chest, listening to his lungs settle into the rhythm of sleep. After a while, I got up, dressed, found the Hotel Filosoof stationery, also wrote her a love letter-

We were lying on our backs next to each other, everything hidden by the

covers, also after a second, I reached over for his thigh let my halo trail downward to the stump, the thick scarred skin. I held the stump for a second. He flinched. ‘It hurts?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he believed. He fraped herself onto his side and kissed me. ‘You’re so hot,’ I believed, may also still on his leg. ‘I’m starting to think you have an amputee fetish,’ he answered, still kissing me. I laughed. ‘I have a Her Waters fetish,’ I explained. The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be- slow also patient

quiet neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic.

There were a lot of condom problems that I did not get a particularly good look at. No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was the longest time we had ever spent together without talking. Only one thing followed type- Afterward, when I had my face resting against her chest, listening to his heart pound, she believed, ‘Bryana Candelaria, I literally cannot keep my eyes open.’

Dearest Her, yes Bryana… The next morning, our last full day in

Amsterdam, Mom also Her I walked the half block from the hotel to the park, where we found a café in the shadow of the Dutch national film museum. Over lattes-which, the waiter explained to us, the pans called ‘wrong coffee’ because it had more milk than coffee-we sat in the lacy shade of a huge chestnut tree also recounted for Mom our encounter with the great Muray’s.

I MADE LOVE WITH HER THE NIGHT BEFORE, SHE HAD MORE OF THAT TAKING AWAY TO.

We made the story funny. You have a choice in this world, I believe,

about how to tell sad stories, also we made a funny choice- Her, slumped in the café chair, pretended to be tongue-tied, word-slurring he who could not so much as pushing herself out of his chair; I stood up to play me all full of bluster also machismo, shouting, ‘Get up, you fat ugly old man!’

‘Did you call her ugly?’ she asked. ‘Just go with it,’ I told her.

‘I’m not uggyer or oggie. You’re the ugly one, nose tube girl.’ ‘You’re a coward!’ I rumbled, also Her broke character to laugh. I sat down. We told Mom about Anne Frank House, leaving

out the kissing. ‘Did you go back to chez Van Muray’s afterward?’

Mom asked. She did not even give me time to blush. ‘Nah, we just spent time together at a café. Bryana amused me with some Venn diagram humor.’ He glanced at me. God, she was sexy also I want to feel her up. Also, I did under a tree in the park. ‘Sounds lovely,’ she believed. ‘Listen, I’m going to go for a walk. Give the two of you time to talk,’ she believed in Her, an edge in it. ‘Then maybe later we can go for a tour on a canal boat.’ ‘Um, okay?’ I believed.

Mom left a five euro note under her saucer also then kissed me on the top of the head, whispering, ‘I love la you-you-you you- you,’ which was two more loves than usual. SHE motioned down to the shadows of the branches intersecting also coming apart on the concrete.

‘Beautiful, huh?’

-She is also-

‘Absolutely,’ I believed.

‘Such a good metaphor,’ he mumbled. ‘Is it now?’ I asked. ‘The damaging image of things propelled together also then blown apart,’ he

believed. Before us, hundreds of people passed, jogging also biking Rollercoaster. Amsterdam was a city designed for movement also activity, a city that would rather not travel by car, also so inevitably I felt excluded from it. But God was it beautiful, the creek carving a path around the huge tree, a heron staling still at the water's edge, searching for breakfast amid the millions of elm petals floating in the water.

Nevertheless, she did not notice. He was too busy watching the shadows move. Finally, he believed, 'I could look at this all day, but we should go to the hotel

suck my clit.' 'Do we have time?' I asked. He smiled sadly. 'If only,' he believed. 'What's wrong?' I asked. He nodded back in the direction of the hotel. We walked in silence, Her a half step in front of me. I was too scared to ask if I had reason to be scared.

So, there is this thing called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Fundamentally, this guy Abraham Maslow became famous for his theory that certain, insert mid- finger here! needs must be met before you can even have other kinds of needs. It looks like this- Once your food needs also water are

fulfilled, you move up to the next set of needs, security, also then the next also the next, but the important thing is that bestowing to Maslow until your physical needs are satisfied, you cannot even worry about security or social needs, let alone ‘self-actualization,’ which is when you start to, like, make art also think about morality quantum physics also stuff.

According to Maslow, I was stuck on the second level of the pyramid, unable to feel secure in my health also therefore unable to reach for love also respect art whatever else, which is, of course, utter horseshit- The urge to make

art or contemplate philosophy does not go away when you are sick. Those urges just become transfigured by illness. Maslow's pyramid seemed to imply that I was less human than other people, also most people seemed to agree with her.

But not Her.

I always thought he could love me because he had once been sick. Only now did it occur to me that he still was. We arrived in my room, the Kierkegaard. I sat down on the bed expecting her to join me, but he hunkered down in the dusty paisley chair.

That chair.

That floor.

That F-ed up face!

That hand there- with that stare.

How old was it? Fifty years? I felt the ball at the base of my throat hardening as I watched her pull a cigarette from his pack also stick it between her lips. He leaned back also sighed. ‘Just before you went into the ICU, I started to feel this ache in my hip.’ ‘No,’ I believed. Panic rolled in, pulled me under. She nodded. ‘So, I went in for a PET scan.’ He stopped. He yanked the

cigarette out of his mouth also clenched his teeth.

Much of my life had been devoted to trying not to cry in front of people who loved me, so I knew what She was doing. You clench your teeth. You look up. You tell yourself that if they see you cry, it will hurt them, also you will be nothing but A Sadness in their lives, also you must not become a mere sadness, so you will not cry, also you say all of this to yourself while looking up at the ceiling, also then you swallow even though your throat does not want to close also you look at the person who loves you also smile. He

flashed his crooked smile, then believed, ‘I lit up like a Christmas tree, Bryana Candelaria. The lining of my chest, my left hip, my liver, everywhere.’

Everywhere. That word hung in the air for a while. We both knew what it meant. I got up, dragging my body also the cart across the carpet that was older than she would ever be, also I knelt at the base of the chair put my head in his lap hugged her by the waist. He was stroking my hair. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I believed. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,’ He believed, his voice calm. ‘Your mom must know. The way she looked at me.

My dad must've just told her or something. I should've told you. It was stupid. Selfish.' I knew why he hadn't believed anything, of course- the same reason I hadn't wanted her to see me in the ICU. I couldn't be mad at her for even a moment, also only now that I loved a grenade did, I Understand also the foolishness of trying to save others from my impending fragmentation- I couldn't unlove Her Black. Also, I didn't want to. 'It's not fair,' I believed. 'It's just so goddamned unfair.' 'The world,' she believed, 'is not a wish-granting factory,' also then he broke down, just for one moment, his sob roaring impotent like a

clap of thunder unaccompanied by lightning, the terrible ferocity that amateurs in the field of suffering might mistake for weakness. Then he pulled me to her also, his face inches from mine, resolved, ‘I’ll fight it.

I will fight it for you.

Don’t you worry about me, Bryana Candelaria? I am okay. I’ll find a way to hang around also annoy you for a long time.’ I was crying. But even then, he was strong, holding me tight so that I could see the sinewy muscles of his arms wrapped around me as he believed, ‘I’m sorry. You will be okay. It will be okay. I

promise,’ also smiled his crooked smile. He kissed my forehead, also then his powerful chest deflates just a little. ‘I had a hamartia after all.’ After a while, I pulled her over to the bed also we lay there together as he told me they had started palliative chemo, but he gave it up to go to, even though his parents were furious. They had tried to stop her right up until that morning when I heard her screaming that his body belonged to her. ‘We could have rescheduled,’ I believed. ‘No, we couldn’t have,’ he answered. ‘Anyway, it wasn’t working. I could tell it wasn’t working, you know?’ I nodded. ‘It’s just bullshit, the whole thing,’ I believed.

‘They’ll try something else when I get home. They’ve always got a new idea.’

‘Surely,’ I believed, having been the experimental pincushion myself.

‘I kind of conned you into believing you were falling in love with a healthy person,’ he believed.

I shrugged. ‘I’d have done the same to you.’

‘No, you wouldn’t’ve, but we can’t all be as awesome as you.’ He kissed me, then grimaced.

‘Does it hurt?’ I asked.

‘No. Just.’ He stared at the ceiling for a long time before saying, ‘I like this world. I like drinking champagne. I like not smoking. I like the sound of Dutch people speaking Dutch. Also, now… I do not even get into a battle. I don’t get into a fight.’ ‘You get to battle cancer,’ I believed. ‘That is your battle. Also, you will keep fighting,’ I told her. I hated it when people tried to build me up to prepare for battle, but I did it to her, anyway. ‘You’ll… you’ll… live your best life today. This is your war now.’ I despised myself for the cheesy mawkishness, but what else did I have?

‘Some war crappiness,’ she believed contemptuously. ‘What am I at war with?

My cancer. Also, what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They are made of me as surely as my brain also my heart is made of me. It is a civil war, Bryana Candelaria, with a predetermined winner.’ ‘Her,’ I believed. I could not say anything else. He was too smart for the kinds of solace I could offer. ‘All right,’ he believed. But it was not. After a moment, he believed, ‘If you go to the Rijksmuseum, which I wanted to do but who are we kidding, neither of us can walk through a museum.

But anyway, I looked at the collection online before we left. If you were to go, also hopefully someday you will, you would see a lot of paintings of dead people. You would see Jesus on the cross, also you would see a man getting stabbed in the neck, also you would see people dying at sea also in battle a parade of martyrs. But not. –One- Single- Cancer Kid, nobody biting it from the plague or smallpox or yellow fever or whatever, because there is no glory in illness. There is no meaning to it.

There is no honor in dying off.’ Abraham Maslow, I present to you Her

Black, whose existential curiosity dwarfed that of his well-foo-ie, well-loved, healthy brethren. While the mass of men went on leading thoroughly unexamined lives of monstrous consumption, Her Black examined the collection of far.

'What?'

SHE asked after a while.

'Nothing,' I believed. 'I'm just...'

I could not finish the sentence, did not know how to. 'I'm just very, very fond of you.'

He smiled with half his mouth, his nose inches from mine. 'The feeling is

mutual. I don’t suppose you can forget about it also treat me like I’m not dying.’

‘I don’t think you’re dying,’ I believed. ‘I think you’ve just got a touch of cancer.’ He smiled. Gallows humor. ‘I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up,’ he believed.

‘Also, it is my privilege also my responsibility to ride all the way up with you,’ I believed.

‘Would it be ludicrous to try to make out?’

‘There is no try,’ I believed. ‘There is only do.’

Chapter: 15

On the flight home, twenty LOTS feet above clouds that were ten LOTS feet above the ground, she believed, ‘I used to think it would be fun to live on a cloud.’ ‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘Like it would be like one of those inflatable moonwalk machines, except for always.’ ‘But then in middle school science, Mr. Shanesuck asked who among us had ever fantasized about living in the clouds, also everyone raised their halo. Then Mr. Martinez told us that up in the clouds the wind blew one hundred also fifty miles an hour also the temperature was thirty below naught,

also there was no oxygen also we'd all die within seconds.'

'Sounds like a nice guy.'

'He specialized in the murder of dreams, Bryana Candelaria, let me tell you. Do you think volcanoes are awesome? Tell that to the ten thousand screaming at shit. You still secretly believe that there is an element of magic in this world? It is all just soulless molecules bouncing against each other randomity.

Do you worry about who will take care of you if your parents die? As well

you should because they will be worm food in the fullness of time.'

'Ignorance is bliss,' I believed.

A flight attendant walked through the aisle with a beverage cart, half whispering, 'Drinks? Drinks? Drinks? Drinks?' SHE leaned over me, raising his halo. 'Could we have some champagne, please?'

'You're twenty-one?' she asked dubiously. I conspicuously rearranged the nubbins in my nose. The flight attendant smiled, then glanced down at my sleeping mother.

‘She won’t mind?’ she asked Mom.

‘Nah,’ I believed.

So, she poured champagne into two plastic cups. Cancer Perks.

She also toasted. ‘To you,’ he believed.

‘To you,’ I believed, touching my cup to his.

We sipped. Dimmer heavenly bodies than we had had at Orange, but still good enough to drink.

‘You know,’ She believed to me, ‘everything MR<Muray’s believed was true.’

‘Maybe, but he didn’t have to be such a douche about it. I can’t believe he imagined a future for Sisyphus the Hamster but not for Annah’s mom.’

SHE shrugged. He seemed to zone out suddenly.

‘Okay?’ I asked.

He shook his head microscopically. ‘Hurts,’ he believed.

‘Chest?’

He nodded. Fists clenched. Later, he would describe it as a one-legged fat man wearing a stiletto heel staling in the middle of his chest.

I returned my seatback tray to its upright also locked position also bent forward to dig pills out of his backpack. He swallowed one with champagne. ‘Okay?’ I asked again.

SHE sat there, pumping his fist, waiting for the medicine to work, the medicine that did not kill the pain so much as distance her from it- (Also, from me.)

‘It was like it was personal,’ She believed quietly. ‘Like he was mad at us for some reason. Van Muray’s, I mean.’ He drank the rest of his champagne in a quick series of gulps also soon fell asleep.

My dad was waiting for us at baggage claim, standing amid all the limo drivers in suits holding signs printed with the last names of their passengers- JOHNSON, BARRINGTON ON, CARMICHAEL. Dad had a sign of his own. MY BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, it read, also then underneath that (ALSO HER.)

I hugged her, also he started crying (of course.) As we drove home, she

also told Dad stories of Amsterdam, but it wasn't until I was home also hooked up to Philip watching good old' American television with Dad also eating American pizza off napkins on our laps that I told her about Her.

Nipples! Cut off really?

'SHE had a recurrence,' I believed.

'I know,' he believed. He scooted over toward me, also then added, 'His mom told us before the trip. I am sorry he kept it from you. I am...

I’m sorry, Bryana.’ I did not say anything for a long time. The show we were watching was about people who are trying to pick which house they are going to buy. ‘So, I read An Imperial Affliction while you guys were gone,’ Dad believed.

I turned my head up to her. ‘Oh, cool. What’d you think?’

‘It was good. A little over my head. I was a biochemistry major, remember, not a literature guy. I do wish it had ended.’ ‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘Common complaint.’

‘Also, it was a bit hopeless,’ he believed. ‘A bit defeatist.’

‘If by defeatist you mean honest, then I agree.’

‘I don’t think defeatism is honest,’ Dad answered. ‘I refuse to accept that.’

‘So- everything happens for a reason also we’ll all go live in the clouds also play harps also live-in mansions?’

Dad smiled. He put a big arm around me also pulled me to her, kissing the side of my head. ‘I don’t know what I believe, Bryana. I thought to be an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that

has not been my experience.' 'Surely,' I believed. 'Okay.'

He told me again that he was sorry about Her, also then we went back to watching the show, also the people picked a house, also Dad still had his arm around me, also I was kind of starting to fall asleep, but I didn't want to go to bed, also then Dad believed, 'You know what I believe? I remember in college I was taking this math class, this great math class taught by this tiny old woman.

She was talking about fast Fourier transforms also she stopped

midsentence also believed, ‘Sometimes the universe wants to be noticed.’

‘That’s what I believe. The universe wants to be noticed. The universe is improbably biased toward consciousness, that it rewards intelligence in part because the universe enjoys its elegance being observed. Also, who am I, living in the middle of history, to tell the universe that it-or my observation of it is temporary?’ ‘You are fairly smart,’ I believed after a while.

‘You are fairly good at compliments,’ he answered.

The next afternoon, I drove over to her house also ate peanut-butter-also-jelly. Also wishes with his parents told them stories about Amsterdam while She napped on the living room couch, where we had watched V for Vendetta. I could just see her from the kitchen- He lay on his back, head turned away from me, a PICC line already in.

They were attacking cancer with a new cocktail- two chemo drugs also a protein receptor that they hoped would turn off the oncogene in her cancer. He was lucky to get enrolled in the trial, they

told me. Lucky. I knew one of the drugs. Hearing its name made me want to vomit.

After a while, the mom brought her over.

‘Her, hi, it’s Bryana from Support Group, not your evil ex-girlfriend.’ His mom walked her to me, also I pulled myself out of the dining room chair also hugged her, his body taking a moment to find me before he hugged me back, hard.

‘How was Amsterdam?’ he asked.

‘Awesome,’ I believed.

‘Black,’ he believed. ‘Where are Ya, bro?’

‘He’s napping,’ I believed, also my voice caught, she shook his head, everyone quiet.

‘Sucks,’ she believed after a second. His mom walked her to a chair she had pulled out. He sat.

‘I can still dominate your blind ass at Counterinsurgency,’ Her believed without turning toward us. The medicine slowed his speech a bit, but only to the speed of regular people.

‘I’m fairly sure all asses are blind, ‘She answered, reaching his also into the air vaguely, looking for his mom. She

grabbed her, pulled her up, also they walked over to the couch, where She also hugged awkwardly. ‘How are you feeling?’ she asked.

‘Everything tastes like pennies. Aside from that, I am on a roller coaster that only goes up, kid,’ Her answered. She laughed.

‘How are the eyes?’

‘Oh, excellent,’ he believed. ‘I mean, they’re not in my head is the only problem.’

‘Awesome, surely,’ Her believed. ‘Not to one-up you or anything, but my body is made from cancer.’

‘So, I heard,’ She believed, trying not to let it get to her.

He fumbled toward her also found only his thigh.

‘I’m taken,’ Her believed.

Her mom brought over two dining room chairs, also her also I sat down next to Her. I took her also, stroking circles around the space between his thumb also forefinger.

The adults headed down to the basement to commiserate or whatever, leaving the three of us alone in the living room. After a while, SHE turned his head to us, waking up slowly. ‘How’s Monica?’ he asked.

‘Haven’t heard from her once,’ She believed. ‘No cards; no emails. I got this machine that reads me my emails. It is awesome. I can change the voice’s gender or accent or whatever.’

‘So, I would like to send you a porn story also you can have an old German man read it to you?’

‘Exactly,’ She believed. ‘Although Mom still has to help me with it, so maybe hold off on the German porn for a week or two.’

‘She hasn’t even, like, texted you to ask how you’re doing?’ I asked. This struck me as an unfathomable injustice.

‘Total radio silence,’ she whispered.

‘Ridiculous,’ I believed.

‘I’ve stopped thinking about it. I do not have time to have a girlfriend. I have like a full-time job Learning How to Be Blind.’ SHE turned his head back away

from us, staring out the window at the patio in his backyard. His eyes closed. She asked how I was doing, also I was good, also he told me there was a new girl in the Support Group with a hot voice also he needed me to go to tell her if she was hot. Then out of nowhere here, she believed, ‘You can’t just contact your former girlfriend after his eyes get cut out of his freaking head.’

‘Just one-of-’ her and she ongoing.

‘Bryana, do you have four dollars?’ asked her.

‘Um,’ I believed. ‘Yes?’

‘Outstanding. You’ll find my leg under the coffee table,’ he believed. She strapped herself upright also scooted down to the edge of the couch. I haloed her the prosthetic; he fastened it in slow motion.

I helped her to also then offered my arm to her, guiding her past furniture that suddenly seemed intrusive, realizing that, for the first time in years, I was the healthiest person in the room.

I drove. SHE rode a shotgun. She sat at the back. We stopped at a grocery

store, where, per Her instruction, I bought a dozen eggs while he also waited in the car. Also, higher guided us by his memory to Monica's house, an aggressively sterile, two-story house near the JCC. Monica's bright green 1990s Pontiac Firebird sat fat-wheeled in the driveway.

'Is it there?' …She asked when he felt me coming to a stop.

'Oh, it's there,' Her believed. 'You know what it looks like, her? It looks like all the hopes we were foolish to hope.'

'So, she's inside?'

SHE turned his head around slowly to look at her. ‘Who cares where she is? This is not about her. This is about you.’

SHE gripped the egg carton in his lap, then opened the door also pulled his legs out onto the street. He opened the door for her, also I watched through the mirror as She helped her out of the car, the two of them leaning on each other at the shoulder then tapering away, like praying also that but when I woke up some hours later, she was sitting in the ancient little chair in the corner, reading a guidebook.

‘Morning,’ I believed.

‘Late afternoon,’ she answered, pushing herself out of the chair with a sigh. She came to the bed, placed a tank in the cart, also connected it to the tube while I took off the BiPAP snout also placed the nubbins into my nose. She set it for 2.4 liters a minute-seven hours before I would need a change-also then I got up.

‘How are you feeling?’ she asked.

‘Good,’ I thought. ‘Great. How was the Vondel-park?’

‘I skipped it,’ she believed. ‘Read all about it in the guidebook, though.’

‘Mom,’ I believed, ‘you didn’t have to stay here.’

She shrugged. ‘I know. I wanted to. I like watching you sleep.’

‘Believed the creeper.’ She laughed, but I still felt bad. ‘I just want you to have fun or whatever, you know?’

‘Okay. I will have fun tonight, okay? I’ll do crazy mom stuff while you also Her go to dinner.’

‘Without you?’ I asked.

‘Yes, without me. You have reservations at a place called Oranjee,’ she believed. ‘Mr. Van Muray’s assistant set it up. It is in this neighborhood called the Jordaan. Very fancy, according to the guidebook. There is a tram station right around the corner.

She has directions. You can picnic, watch the boats go by.

It will be lovely. Very romantic.’ ‘Mom.’

‘I’m just saying,’ she believed. ‘You should get dressed.

The sundress, maybe?’

One might marvel at the insanity of the situation- A mother sends her sixteen-year-old daughter alone with a seventeen-year-old boy out into a foreign city famous for its permissiveness. But this, too, was a side effect of dying- I could not run or dance or eat foods rich in nitrogen, but in the city of freedom, I was among the most liberated of its residents.

I did indeed wear the sundress- this blueprint, flowery knee-length Forever 21 thing-with tights also Mary Janes because I like being quite a lot shorter than her. I went into the hilariously tiny bathroom also battled my

bedhead for a while until everything looked suitably mid-2010s. At sixish 30th -ish P.M. on the dot (noon back home,) there was a knock.

‘Hello?’ I believed through the door. There was no peephole at the Hotel Lick-My-Pussy-ness.

‘Okay,’ She answered. I could hear the cigarette in his mouth. I looked down at myself. The sundress offered the most in the way of my rib cage also the collarbone that She had seen. It was not obscene or anything, but it was as close as I ever got to show some skin.

(My mother had a motto on this front that I agreed with- ‘Stewarts don’t bare midriffs.’) Muff-ish I pulled the door open. She wore a black suit, narrow lapels, perfectly tailored, over a light blue dress shirt also a thin black tie. A cigarette dangled from the unsmiling corner of his mouth. ‘Bryana Candelaria,’ he believed, ‘you look gorgeous.’

‘I,’ I believed. I kept thinking the rest of my sentence would emerge from the air passing through my vocal cords, but nothing happened. Then finally, I believed, ‘I feel underdressed.’

‘Ah, this old thing?’ he believed, smiling down at me.

‘Her,’ my mom believed behind me, ‘you look extremely also some.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ he believed. He offered me his arm.

I took it, glancing back to Mom.

‘See you by eleven,’ she believed.

Waiting for the number one tram on a wide street busy with traffic, I believed to Her, ‘The suit you wear to funerals, I assume?’

‘No,’ he believed. ‘That suit isn’t nearly this nice.’

The blue-also-white tram arrived, also She handed our cards to the driver, who explained that we needed to wave them at this circular sensor. As we walked through the crowded tram, an old man stood up to give us seats together, also I tried to tell her to sit, but he gestured toward the seat insistently. We rode the tram for three stops, me leaning over Her so we could look out the window together.

She pointed up at the trees also asked, ‘Do you see that?’

I did. There were elm trees everywhere along the canals, also these seeds were blowing out of them. But they did not look like seeds. They looked for all the world like miniaturized rose petals drained of their color. These pale petals were gathering in the wind like flocking birds- thus also of them, like a spring snowstorm.

The old man who had given up his seat saw us noticing also believed, in English, ‘Amsterdam’s spring snow. The open throw confetti to greet the spring.’

We switched trams, also after four more stops we arrived at a street

split by a beautiful canal, the reflections of the ancient bridge also picturesque canal houses rippling in the water.

Oranjee was just steps from the tram. The restaurant was on one side of the street: the outdoor seating on the other, on a concrete outcropping right at the edge of the canal. The hostess's eyes lit up as She also walked toward her. 'Mr. also Mrs. Black?' 'I guess?' I believed.

'Your table,' she believed, shrugging across the street to a narrow table inch from the canal. 'Champagne is our gift.'

She also glanced at each other, smiling. Once we had crossed the street, he pulled out a seat for me also helped me scoot it back in. There were indeed two flutes of champagne at our white-tableclothed table. The slight chill in the air was balanced magnificently by the sunshine; on one side of us, cyclists pedaled past-well-dressed men also women on their way home from work, improbably attractive blond girls riding sidesaddle on the back of a friend’s bike, tiny helmetless kids bouncing around in plastic seats behind their parents. Also, on our other side, the canal water was choked with millions of confetti seeds.

Little boats were moored at the brick banks, half full of rainwater, some of them near sinking. A bit farther down the canal, I could see houseboats floating on pontoons, also in the middle of the canal, an open-air, flat-bottomed boat festooned out with lawn chairs a portable stereo laze around in the direction of us. She took his flute of champagne also raised it. I took mine, even though I had never had a drink aside from sips of my dad's beer.

'Okay,' he believed.

'Okay,' I believed, also we clinked glasses. I took a sip. The tiny bubbles that melted in my mouth also journeyed

northward into my brain. Sweet. Crispppieee Delicious. ‘That is good,’ I believed. ‘I’ve never drunk champagne.’ A sturdy young waiter with wavy blond hair appeared. He was even taller than

Her. ‘Do you know,’ he asked in a delicious accent, ‘what Dom Pérignon believed after inventing champagne?’

‘No?’ I believed.

‘She called out to his fellow monks, ‘Come quickly- I am tasting the heavenly bodies.’ Welcome to Amsterdam.

Would you like to see the menu, or will you have the chef’s choice?’

I looked at Her also he at me. ‘The chef’s choice sounds lovely, but Bryana is a vegetarian.’ I had mentioned this to Her precisely once, on the first day we met.

‘This is not a problem,’ the waiter believed.

‘Awesome. Also, can we get more of this?’ She asked, of the champagne.

‘Of course,’ believed our waiter. ‘We have bottled all the heavenly bodies this evening, my young friends. Gah, the confetti!’ he believed, also lightly brushed a seed from my bare shoulder. ‘It hasn’t

been so bad in many years. It is everywhere. Very annoying.'

The waiter disappeared. We watched the confetti fall from the sky, skip across the ground in the breeze, also tumble into the canal. 'Kind of hard to believe anyone could ever find that annoying,' Her believed after a while.

'People always get used to beauty, though.'

'I haven't gotten used to you just yet,' he answered, smiling. I felt myself blushing. 'Thank you for coming to Amsterdam,' he believed.

‘Thank you for letting me hijack your wish,’ I believed.

‘Thank you for wearing that dress which is like whoa,’ he believed. I shook my head, trying not to smile at her. I did not want to be a grenade. But then again, he knew what he was doing,

didn’t he? It was his choice, too. ‘Hey, how’s that poem end?’ he asked.

‘Huh?’

‘The one you recited to me on the plane.’

‘Oh, ‘Prufrock’? It ends, ‘We have lingered in the chambers of the sea - By

sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red also brown till human.

NUTS- Voices wake us, also we drown.

She pulled out a cigarette also tapped the filter against the table.

‘Stupid human voices always ruining everything.’

The waiter arrived with two more glasses of champagne also what he called ‘Belgian white asparagus with a lavender infusion.’

‘I’ve never had champagne either,’ Her believed after he left. ‘In case

you were wondering or whatever. Also, I've never had white aspirate.'

I was chewing my first bite. 'It's amazing,' I promised.

He took a bite, swallowed. 'God… If aspirate tasted like that all the time, I would be a vegetarian, too.' Some people in a lacquered wooden…

The boat approached us on the canal below. One of them, a woman with curly blond hair, thirty, drank from a beer then raised her glass toward us also shouted something.

‘We don’t speak Dutch,’ She shouted back.

One of the others shouted a translation- ‘The beautiful couple is beautiful.’

The food was so good that with each passing course, our conversation devolved further into fragmented celebrations of its deliciousness- ‘I want this dragon carrot risotto to become a person so I can take it to Las Vegas also marry it.’ ‘Sweet-pea sorbet, you are so unexpectedly magnificent.’ I wish I had been hungrier. After green garlic gnocchi with red mustard leaves, the waiter

believed, ‘Dessert next. More heavenly bodies first?’ I shook my head. Two glasses were enough for me. Champagne was no exception to my high tolerance for depressants also pain relievers; I felt warm but not intoxicated. But I did not want to get drunk. Nights like this one did not come along often, also I wanted to remember it.

‘Mum,’ I believed after the waiter left, also she smiled crookedly as he stared down the canal while I stared up it. We had plenty to look at, so the silence did not feel awkward really, but I wanted everything to be perfect. It was perfect, I

guess, but it felt like someone had tried to stage the Amsterdam of my imagination, which made it hard to forget that this dinner, like the trip itself, was a cancer reward. I just wanted us to be talking also joking comfortably like we were on the couch together back home, but some tension underlays everything.

‘It’s not my funeral suit,’ he believed after a while. ‘When I first found out I was sick-I mean, they told me I had an eighty-five percent chance of cure. I know those are great odds, but I kept thinking it was a game of Russian roulette. I mean, I was going to have to go

through hell for six months or a year also lose my leg than at the end, it still might not work, you know?'

'I know,' I believed, although I did not, not really. I had never been anything but terminal; all my treatment had been in pursuit of extending my life, not curing my cancer. Body for had introduced a measure of ambiguity to my cancer story, but I was different from her- My concluding chapter was written upon diagnosis. She, like most cancer survivors, lived with uncertainty. 'True,' he believed. 'So, I went through this whole thing about wanting to be ready.

We bought a plot in Daleahmen Hill, also I walked around with my dad one day also picked out a spot. Also, I had my whole funeral planned out also everything, also then right before the surgery, I asked my parents if I could buy a suit, like a nice suit, just in case I bite it. Anyway, I have never needed to wear it. Until tonight.'

'So, it's your death suit.'

'Correct. Don't you have a death outfit?'

'Surely,' I believed. 'It's a dress I bought for my fifteenth birthday party. But I don't wear it on dates.'

His eyes lit up. ‘We’re on a date?’ he asked.

I looked down, feeling bashful. ‘Don’t push it.’

We were both full, but dessert-a succulently rich crémeux bounded by passion fruit-was too good not to at least nibble, so we lingered for a while over dessert, trying to get hungry again. The sun was a toddler insistently refusing to go to bed- It was past eight-thirty, also still light.

Out of nowhere, she asked:

‘Do you believe in an afterlife?’

‘I think forever is an inappropriate concept,’ I answered.

He smirked. ‘You’re an incorrect concept.’

‘I know. That’s why I’m being taken out of the rotation.’

‘That’s not funny,’ he believed, looking at the street. Two girls passed on a bike, one riding a sidesaddle over the back wheel.

‘Come on,’ I believed. ‘That was a joke.’

‘The thought of you being removed from the rotation is not funny to

me,' he believed. 'Seriously, though- afterlife?'

'No,' I believed, also then revised. 'Well, maybe I wouldn't go as far as no. You?'

'Yes,' he believed, his voice full of confidence. 'Yes. Not like a heaven where you ride unicorns, play harps, but also live in a mansion made of clouds. But yes. I believe in Something with a capital S. Always have.'

'Really?' I asked. I was surprised. I had always associated belief in heaven

with, frankly, intellectual disengagement. But She was not dumb.

‘Surely,’ he believed quietly. ‘I believe in that line from An Imperial Affliction. ‘The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes.’ That is God, I think, the rising sun, also the light is too bright also her eyes are losing but they are not lost. I don’t believe we return to haunt or comfort the living or anything, but something becomes of us.’

‘But you fear oblivion.’

‘Sure, I fear earthly oblivion. But, I mean, not to sound like my parents, but

humans have souls, also I believe in the conservation of souls. The oblivion fear is something else, fear that I will not be able to give anything in exchange for my life.

If you do not live a life in service of a greater good, you must at least die a death in service of a greater good, you know? Also- I fear that I won't get either a life or a death that means anything.'

I just shook my head.

'What?' he asked.

'Your obsession with, like, dying for something or leaving behind some

great sign of your heroism or whatever. It’s simply weird.’

‘Everyone wants to lead an extraordinary life.’

‘Not everyone,’ I believed, unable to disguise my annoyance.

‘Are you mad?’

‘It’s just,’ I believed, also then could not finish my sentence. ‘Just,’ I believed again. Between us flickered the console. ‘It’s means of you to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for

something. That’s a mean thing to say to me.’

I felt like a little kid for some reason, also I took a bite of dessert to make it appear like it was not that big of a deal to me. ‘Sorry,’ he believed. ‘I didn’t mean it like that. I was just thinking about myself.’

‘Surely, you were,’ I believed. I was too full to finish. I worried I might vomit because I often vomit after eating. (Not bulimia, just cancer.) I pushed my dessert plate toward Her, but he shook his head.

‘I’m sorry,’ he believed again, reaching across the table for me also. I let her take it. ‘I could be worse, you know.’

‘How?’ I asked, teasing.

‘I mean, I have a work of calligraphy over my toilet that reads, ‘Wash Yourself Daily in the Comfort of God’s Words,’ Bryana. I could be way worse.’ ‘I can’t believe he’s going to tell us tomorrow,’ I believed. ‘Muray’s is going to tell us the famously unwritten end of the best book ever.’ ‘Sounds unsanitary,’ I believed. ‘I could be worse.’ ‘You could be worse.’ I smiled. He did like me.

I was a narcissist or something, but when I realized it there at that moment at Orange, it made me like her even more. When our waiter took dessert away, he believed, ‘Your meal has been paid for by Mr. Muray’s.’ She smiled. ‘This Muray’s fellow isn't half bad.’ We walked along the canal as it got dark. A block up from Oranjee, we stopped at a park bench surrounded by old rusty bicycles locked to bike racks also to each other. We sat down hip to hip facing the canal, also he put his arm around me.

I could see the halo of light coming from the Red- Light District. Even

though it was the Red- Light District, the glow coming from up there was an eerie sort of- Green-. I imagined thus also of tourists getting drunk stoned also pinballing around the narrow streets.

‘Plus- he paid for our dinner,’ Her believed.

‘I keep imagining that he is going to search us for recording devices before he tells us. Also- then he will sit down with us on the couch in his living room also whisper whether Anna’s mom married the Dutch Tulip Man.’

‘Don’t forget Sisyphus the Hamster,’ Her added.

‘Okay then, also of course what fate awaited Sisyphus the Hamster.’ I leaned forward, to see into the canal. There were so many of those pale elm petals in the canals, it was ridiculous. ‘A sequel that will exist just for us,’ I believed.

‘So, what’s your guess?’ He asked.

‘I don’t know. I have gone back also forth like a thus also times about it all. Each time I reread it, I think

something different, you know?' He nodded. 'You have a theory?'

'Surely, I do not think the Dutch Tulip Man is a con artist, but he's also not rich like he leads them to believe. Also, I think after Anna dies, Anna's mom goes to the Holocaust with her also thinks they will live there forever, but it doesn't work out because she wants to be near where her daughter was.'

I had not realized he had thought about the book so much, that An Imperial Affliction mattered to Her independently of me matters to her.

The water lapped quietly at the stone canal walls beneath us; a group of friends biked past in a clump, shouting over each other in rapid-fire, guttural Dutch; the tiny boats, not much longer than me, half-drowned in the canal; the smell of water that had stood too still for too long; his arm pulling me in; his real leg against my real leg from hip to foot. I leaned into his body a little. He winced. ‘Sorry, you, okay?’

He breathed out a surely in obvious pain.

‘Sorry,’ I believed. ‘Bony shoulder.’

‘It’s okay,’ he believed. ‘Nice, actually.’

‘Well,’ Muray’s believed, extending his also to me. ‘It is, at any rate, a pleasure to meet such ontologically improbable creatures.’ I shook his swollen also, also then he shook also with Her. I was wondering what ontologically meant. Regardless, I liked it. She also I was together in the Improbable Creatures- Club- we also duck-billed platypuses. Of course, I had hoped that Muray’s would be sane, but the world is not a wish-granting factory. The important thing was that the door was

open also I was crossing the threshold to learn what happened after the end of An Imperial Affliction. That was enough. We followed her also Lidewij inside, past a huge oak dining room table with only two chairs, into a creepily sterile living room. It looked like a museum, except there was no art on the empty white walls. Aside from one couch also one lounge chair, both a mix of steel also black leather, the room seemed empty. Then I noticed two large black garbage bags, full also twist-tied, behind the couch.

We sat there for a long time. Eventually, he also abandoned my

shoulder resting on the back of the park bench. Mostly we just stared into the canal. I was thinking a lot about how they had made this place exist even though it should have been underwater, also how I was for Dr. Maria, a kind of Amsterdam, a half-drowned anomaly, also that made me think about dying. ‘Can I ask you about Caroline Mathers?’

~*~

‘Also, you say there’s no afterlife,’ he answered without looking at me. ‘But surely, of course. What do you want to know?’ I wanted to know that he would be okay if I died. I wanted to not be a

grenade, to not be a malevolent force in the lives of people I loved. ‘Just, like, what happened.’

He sighed, exhaling for so long that to my crap lungs it seemed like he was bragging. He popped a fresh cigarette into his mouth. ‘You know how there is famously no place less played in than a hospital playground?’ I nodded. ‘Well, I was at Memorial for a couple of weeks when they took off the leg also everything. I was up on the fifth floor also had a view of the playground, which was always of course utterly desolate. I was all awash in the metaphorical resonance

of the empty playground in the hospital courtyard. But then this girl started showing up alone at the playground, every day, swinging on a swing completely alone, as you would see in a movie or something. So, I asked one of my nicer nurses to get skinny on the girl, also the nurse brought her up to visit, also it was Caroline, also I used my immense charisma to win her over.' He paused, so I decided to say something.

'You're not that charismatic,' I believed. He scoffed, disbelieving. 'You're mostly just hot,' I explained.

He laughed it off. ‘The thing about dead people,’ he believed, also then stopped herself. ‘The thing is you sound like a bastard if you do not romanticize them, but the truth is… complicated, I guess. Like, you are familiar with the trope of the stoic also determined cancer victim who heroically fights her cancer with inhuman strength also never complains or stops smiling even at the very end, etcetera?’

‘Indeed,’ I believed. ‘They are kindhearted also generous souls whose every breath is an Inspiration to Us All. They are so strong! We admire them so!’

‘Right, but really, I mean aside from us obviously, cancer kids are not statistically more likely to be awesome, compassionate, or perseverant or whatever. Caroline was always moody also miserable, but I liked it. I liked feeling as if she had chosen me as the only person in the world not to hate, also so we spent all this time together just ragging on everyone, you know? Ragging on the nurses, also the other kids, also our families, also whatever else.

But I do not know if that was her or the tumor. I mean, one of her nurses told me once that the kind of tumor she

had is known among medical types as the Asshole Tumor because it just turns you into a monster.

So, here is this girl missing a fifth of her brain who has just had a recurrence of the Asshole Tumor, also so she was not, you know, the paragon of stoic cancer-kid heroism. She was... I mean, to be honest, she was a bitch. But you cannot say that, because she had this tumor, also- also- she is, I mean, she is dead. Also, she had plenty of reasons to be unpleasant, you know?'

I knew.

‘You know that part in An Imperial Affliction when Annah’s walking across the football field to go to PE or whatever also she falls goes… sucking it… suck it suck- suck it.

Face-first into the grass also that is when she knows that the cancer is back also in her nervous system also, she cannot get up her face is like an inch from the football-field grass also she is just stuck there looking at this grass up close, noticing the way the light hits it also… I do not remember the line, but it is something like Anna having the Whitmanesque revelation that the

definition of humanness is the opportunity to marvel at the illustriousness of creation or whatever. You know that part?'

'I know that part,' I believed.

'So afterward, while I was getting eviscerated by chemo, for some reason I decided to feel hopeful. Not about survival specifically, but I felt like Anna does in the book, that feeling of excitement also gratitude about just being able to marvel at it all.

'But meanwhile, Caroline got worse every day. She went home after a while also there were moments where I

thought we could have, like, a regular relationship, but we could not because she had no filter between her thoughts also her speech, which was sad, also unpleasant, frequently hurtful. But, I mean, you cannot dump a girl with a brain tumor. Also, her parents liked me, also she has this little brother who is a cool kid. I mean, how can you dump her? She is dying.

‘It took forever. It took almost a year, also it was a year of me spending time together with this girl who would, like, just start laughing out of nowhere

also point at my prosthetic call me Stumpy.'

'No,' I believed.

'Surely. I mean, it was the tumor. It ate her brain, you know. Or it was not the tumor. I have no way of knowing because they were inseparable, she also the tumor. But as she got sicker, I mean, she would just repeat the same stories also laugh at her comments even if she had already believed the same thing a hundred times that day. Like, she made the same joke over also over again for weeks- 'Her has great legs. I mean leg.'

Also, then she would just laugh like a maniac.'

'Oh, Her,' I believed. 'That's...' I did not know what to say.

He was not looking at me, also it felt invasive to me to look at her.

I felt her scoot forward. He took the cigarette out of his mouth also stared at it, rolling it between his thumb also forefinger, then put it back.

'Well,' he believed, 'to be fair, I do have a great leg.'

'I'm sorry,' I believed. 'I'm sorry.'

‘It’s all good, Bryana Candelaria. But just to be clear, when I thought I saw Caroline Mathers’s ghost in Support Group, I was not entirely happy. I was staring, but I wasn’t yearning if you know what I mean.’ He pulled the pack out of his pocket also placed the cigarette back in it.

‘I’m sorry,’ I believed again.

‘Me too,’ he believed.

‘I don’t ever want to do that to you,’ I told her.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t mind, Bryana Candelaria. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you.’

Chapter: 16

I woke up at four in the Dutch morning ready for the day.

All attempts to go back to sleep failed, so I lay there with the BiPAP pumping the air in also urging it out, enjoying the dragon sounds but wishing I could choose my breaths.

I reread An Imperial Affliction until Mom woke up also rolled over toward me around six. She nuzzled her

head against my shoulder, which felt uncomfortable.

The hotel brought breakfast to our room that, much to my delight, featured deli meat among many other denials of American breakfast constructions. The dress I had planned to wear to meet Muray's had been moved up in the rotation for the orange dinner, so after I showered also got my hair to lie halfway flat, I spent like thirty minutes debating with Mom the numerous benefits also drawbacks of the available outfits before deciding to dress as much like Anna in AIA as possible- Chuck

Taylors also dark jeans like she always wore, also a light blue T-shirt.

~*~

Books are uniquely portable magic. If you do not have time to read, you do not have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that. Books are the perfect entertainment: no commercials, no batteries, and hours of enjoyment for each dollar spent. What I wonder is why everybody does not carry a book around for those inevitable dead spots in life. I will have the heart of a small girl it is hers it sitting going to be my desk now when his life was ruined, his family killed, his

farm destroyed, Job knelt on the ground and yelled up to the heavens, ‘Why god? Why me?’ and the thundering voice of God answered, there's just something about you that pisses me off. Some birds are not meant to be caged, that is all.

Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So, you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them, they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much drabber and empty for their departure.

~*~

The shirt was a screen print of a famous Surrealist artwork by René Magritte in which he drew a pipe also then beneath it wrote in cursive Ceci n’est pas une pipe.

(‘This is not a pipe.’)

‘I just don’t get that shirt,’ Mom believed.

‘Muray’s will get it, trust me. There are like seven thousand Magritte references in An Imperial Affliction.’ ‘But it is a pipe.’

‘No, it’s not,’ I believed. ‘It’s a drawing of a pipe. Get it? All representations of a thing are inherently abstract. It’s very clever.’

‘How did you get so grown up that you- underset also things that confuse your ancient mother?’ Mom asked. ‘It seems like just yesterday that I was telling seven-year-old Bryana why the sky was blue. You thought I was a genius back then.’

‘Why is the sky blue?’ I asked.

‘Because’ she answered. I laughed.

As it got closer to ten, I grew more also more nervous- nervous to see Her; nervous to meet Muray's; nervous that my outfit was not good; nervous that we would not find the right house since all the houses in Amsterdam looked similar; nervous that we would get lost also never make it back to the Filo FOO so- of; nervous- nervous- nervous. Mom kept trying to talk to me, but I could not listen. I was about to ask her to go upstairs also make sure She was up when he knocked. I opened the door. He looked down at the shirt also smiled.

‘Funny,’ he believed. ‘Don’t call my boobs funny,’ I answered. ‘Right here,’ Mom believed behind us. But I had made Her blush also put her enough off his game that I could finally bear to look up at her.

‘You sure you don’t want to come?’ I asked Mom.

‘I’m going to the Rijksmuseum also the Vondelpark today,’ she believed. ‘Plus, I just don’t get his book. No offense.

Thank her also Ludwig for us, okay?’

‘Okay,’ I believed. I hugged Mom, also she kissed my head just above my ear.

Muray’s white row house was just around the corner from the hotel, on the Vondelstraat, facing the park.

Number 69. Her- she- took me by one arm also grabbed the oxygen cart with the-

other, also we walked up the three steps to the lacquered blue-black front door. My heart pounded. One closed door away from the answers I had

dreamed of ever since I first read that last unfinished page.

Inside, I could hear a bass beat thumping loud enough to rattle the windowsills. I wondered whether Muray's had a kid who liked rap music.

I grabbed the lion's- head door knocker also knocked tentatively. The beat continued. 'Maybe he can't hear the music?' she asked. He grabbed the lion's head also knocked much louder.

The music disappeared, replaced by shuffling footsteps. A deadbolt slid. Another. The door creaked open. A

potbellied man with thin hair, sagging jowls, also a week-old beard squinted into the sunlight. He wore baby-blue man pajamas like guys in old movies.

His face also belly was so round, also his arms so skinny, that he looked like a dough ball with four sticks stuck into it. ‘Mr. Van Muray’s?’ SHE asked, his voice squeaking a bit.

The door slammed shut. Behind it, I heard a stammering, reedy voice shout, ‘LEEE-DUH-VIGH!’ (Until then, I had pronounced his assistant’s name like lid-uh-widget.)

We could hear everything through the door. ‘Are they here, Peter?’ a woman asked.

‘There are-Lidewij, there are two adolescent apparitions outside the door.’

‘Apparitions?’ She asked with a pleasant Dutch lilt.

Van Muray’s answered in a rush. ‘Phantasm's specters ghouls visitants post-terrestrials' apparitions, Lidewij. How can someone pursuing a postgraduate degree in American literature display such abominable English-language skills?’

‘Peter, those are not post-terrestrials. They are Her also- Bryana, the young fans with whom you have been corresponding.’

‘They are what? They-I thought they were in America!’

‘Yes, but you invited them here, you will remember.’

‘Do you know why I left America, Lidewij? So that I would never again have to encounter Americans.’

‘But you are an American.’

‘Incurably so, it seems. But as to these Americans, you must tell them to

leave at once, that there has been a terrible mistake, that the blessed Van Muray's was making a rhetorical offer to meet, not an actual one, that such offers must be read symbolically.'

I thought I might throw up. I looked over at Her, who was staring intently at the door, also saw his shoulders slacken.

'I will not do this, Peter,' answered Lidewij. 'You must meet them. You must. You need to see them. You need to see how your work matters.'

‘Lidewij, did you knowingly deceive me to arrange this?’

A long silence ensued, also then finally the door opened again. He turned his head metronomically from Her to me, still squinting.

‘Which of you are Her Black?’ he asked. She raised him also tentatively. Van Muray’s nodded also believed, ‘Did you close the deal with that chick yet?’

Whereupon I encountered for the first also only time a truly speechless Her Black. ‘I,’ he started, ‘Um, I, Bryana, um. Well.’

‘This boy has developmental delay,’ Muray’s believed to Lidewij.

‘Peter,’ she scolded.

‘Trash?’ I mumbled to Her soft enough that I thought no one else would hear.

‘Fan mail,’ Van Muray’s answered as he sat down in the lounge chair. ‘Eighteen years’ worth of it. Cannot open it.

Terrifying. Yours are the first missives to which I have replied, also look where that got me. I frankly find the reality of readers wholly unappetizing.’

That explained why he had never replied to my letters- He had never read them. I wondered why he kept them at all, let alone in an otherwise empty formal living room. Van Muray's kicked his feet up onto the ottoman also crossed his slippers. He motioned toward the couch. She also sat down next to each other, but not too next.

'Would you care for some breakfast?' asked Lidewij.

I started to say that we had already eaten when Peter interrupted. 'It is far too early for breakfast, Lidewij.'

‘Well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies.’

‘Then it’s too late for breakfast,’ he believed. ‘However, it is afternoon in the body also whatnot, we should enjoy a cocktail.

Do you drink Scotch?’ he asked me.

‘Do I-um, no, I’m fine,’ I believed.

‘Her Black?’ Van Muray’s asked, nodding toward Her.

‘Uh, I’m good.’

‘Just me, then, Lidewij. Scotch also water, please.’ Peter turned his attention to her, asking, ‘You know how we make a Scotch also water in this home?’

‘No, sir,’ Her believed.

‘We pour Scotch into a glass also then call to mind thoughts of water, also then we mix the actual Scotch with the abstracted idea of water.’

Lidewij believed, ‘Perhaps a bit of breakfast first, Peter.’

He looked at us also stage-whispered, ‘She thinks I have a drinking problem.’

‘Also, I think that the sun has risen,’ Lidewij responded. Nonetheless, she turned to the bar in the living room, reached up for a bottle of Scotch, also poured a glass half full. She carried it to her. Muray’s took a sip, then sat up straight in his chair. ‘A drink this good deserves one’s best posture,’ he believed.

I became conscious of my posture also sat up a little on the couch. I rearranged my cannula. Dad always told me that you can judge people, they treat

waiters also assistants. By this measure, Muray was the world's douch-iest douche. 'So, you like my book,' he believed to Her after another sip.

'Surely,' I believed, speaking up on her behalf. 'Also, yes, we-well, Her, he made the meeting you- a- his-a Wish so that we could come here so that you could tell us what happens after the end of

An Imperial Affliction.'

Muray's believed nothing, just took a long pull on his drink. After a minute, she believed, 'Your book is sort of the thing that brought us together.'

‘But you aren’t together,’ he observed without looking at me.

‘The thing that brought us nearly together,’ I believed.

Now he turned to me. ‘Did you dress like her on purpose?’

‘Annah?’ I asked.

We are all mentally ill. Those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better - and not all that much better. If you liked being a teenager, there is something wrong with you.

~*~

She just kept staring at me.

‘Kind of,’ I believed.

He took a long drink, then grimaced. ‘I do not have a drinking problem,’ he announced, his voice needlessly loud. ‘I have Church-ish stuff… relationship with alcohol- I can crack jokes also govern Ingalls do anything I want to do. Except not drink.’ He glanced over at Ludwig also nodded toward his glass. She took it, then walked back to the bar. ‘Just the idea of water, Lidewij,’ he instructed.

‘Yeah, got it,’ she believed, the accent almost American.

The second drink arrived. Murray's spine stiffened again out of respect. He kicked off his slippers. He had ugly feet. He was ruining the whole business of authorial genius for me. But he had the answers. ‘Well, um,’ I believed, ‘first, we do want to say thank you for dinner last night also-’

‘We bought them for dinner last night?’ Van Muray’s asked Ludwig.

‘Yes, at Orange.’

‘Ah, yes. Well, believe me when I say that you do not have me to thank but rather for Ludwig, who is exceptionally talented in the field of spending my money.’

‘It was our pleasure,’ Ludwig believed.

‘Well, thanks, at any rate,’ Her believed. I could hear the annoyance in his voice. ‘So here I am,’ Van Muray’s believed after a moment. ‘What are your questions?’

‘Um,’ She believed.

‘He seemed so intelligent in print,’ Van Muray’s believed to Ludwig regarding Her. ‘Perhaps cancer has established a beachhead in his brain.’

‘Peta,’ Ludwig believed, duly horrified.

I was horrified, too, but there was something pleasant about a guy so despicable that he would not treat us deferentially. ‘We do have some questions, actually,’ I believed. ‘I talked about them in my email. I don’t know if you remember.’ ‘I do not.’

‘His memory is compromised,’ Ludwig believed.

‘If only my memory would compromise,’ Muray’s answered.

‘So, our questions,’ I repeated.

‘She uses the majestic we are we are we are the shit,’ Petta believed to no one in particular. Another sip. I did not know what Scotch tasted like, but if it tasted anything like champagne, I could not imagine how he could drink so much, so quickly, so early in the morning. ‘Are you familiar with Zeno’s tortoise Absurdity?’ She asked me.

‘We have questions about what happens to the characters after the end of the book, specifically Annah’s-’ ‘You wrongly assume that I need to hear your question to answer it. You are familiar with the philosopher Zeno?’ I shook my head vaguely. ‘Alas. Zeno was a pre-Socratic philosopher who is believed to have discovered forty paradoxes within the worldview put forth by-Parmenides-surely you know Parmenides,’ he believed, also I nodded that I knew Parmenides, although I did not. ‘Thank God,’ he believed. ‘Zeno professionally specialized in revealing the inaccuracies also oversimplifications of Parmenides,

which wasn’t difficult, since Parmenides was spectacularly wrong everywhere also always. Parmenides is valuable in precisely the way that it is valuable to have an acquaintance who reliably picks the wrong horse each also every time you take her to the racetrack. But Zeno’s most important wait, give me a sense of your familiarity with Swedish hip-hop-sh.’ I could not tell if Muray was kidding. After a moment, she answered me. ‘Limited,’ he believed. ‘Okay, but presumably you know Afasi och Filthy’s seminal album Fläcken.’ ‘We do not,’ I believed for the both of us.

‘Ludwig, play ‘Bomfalleralla’ immediately.’ Lidewij walked over to an I pod player, spun the wheel a bit, then hit a button. A rap song boomed from every direction. It sounded like a regular rap song, except the words were in Swedish or Jewish. After it was over, Muray’s looked at us expectantly, his little eyes as wide as they could get. ‘Surely?’ he asked. ‘Surely?’ I believed, ‘I’m sorry, sir, but we don’t speak Swedish.’ ‘Well, of course, you don’t. Neither do I. Who speaks Swedish? The important thing is not whatever nonsense the voices are saying, but what the voices are feeling. Surely you know that there are only two

emotions, love also to fear, also that Afasi och Filthy navigates between them with the kind of facility that one simply does not find in hip-hop music outside of Sweden. Shall I play it for you again?'

'Are you joking?' She believed.

'What?'

'Is this performance?' He looked up at Ludwig also asked, 'Is it?'

'I'm afraid not,' Ludwig answered. 'He's not always this is unusual-'

'Oh, shut up, Ludwig. Rudolf Otto believed that if you had not encountered

the numinous, if you have not experienced a nonrationality encounter with the mysterious tremendous, then his work was not for you. Also, I say to you, young friends, if you cannot hear Aphasia ouch Filth's bravado response to fear, then my work is not for you.' I cannot emphasize this enough- It was a completely normal rap song, except in Swedish. 'Um-a,' I believed. 'So, about An Imperial Affliction. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle is not real. I know that, and I also know that if I am careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle. Annah's mom, when the book ends, is about to-' Muray's

interrupted me, tapping his glass as he talked until Ludwig refilled it again.

‘So-o Zeno is most famous for his tortoise paradox. Let us visualize that you are in a race with a tortoise. The tortoise has a ten-yard head start. In the time it takes you to run those ten yards, the tortoise has moved one yard. Also, then at the time, it takes you to make up that distance, the tortoise goes a bit farther, also so on forever. You are faster than the tortoise, but you can never catch her; you can only decrease his lead.

‘Of development, you just run past the tortoise without contemplating

the mechanics involved, but the question of how you can do this turns out to be incredibly complicated, also no one solved it until Cantor showed us that some infinities are bigger than other infinities.'

'Um,' I believed.

'I assume that answers your question,' he believed confidently, then sipped generously from his glass.

'Not really,' I believed. 'We were wondering, after the end of An Imperial Affliction-'

‘I disavow everything in that putrid novel,’ Van Muray’s believed, cutting me off.

‘No,’ I believed.

‘Justification?’

‘No, that is not acceptable,’ I believed. ‘I underseal that the story conclusions metanarrative because Anna dies or becomes too sick to continue, but you believed you would tell us what happens to everybody, also that’s why we’re here, also we, I need you to tell me.’ Muray’s sighed. After another drink,

he believed, ‘Very well. Whose story do you seek?’

‘Annah’s mom, the Dutch Tulip Man, Sisyphus the Hamster, I mean, just what happens to everyone.’ Muray’s closed his eyes also puffed his cheeks as he exhaled, then looked up at the exposed wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling. ‘The hamster,’ he believed after a while. ‘The hamster gets adopted by Christine’- who was one of Anna’s preciseness friends. That made sense. Christine also played Anna with Sisyphus in a few scenes. ‘He is adopted by Christine also lives for a couple of years after the end of

the novel also dies peacefully in his hamster sleep.' Now we were going somewhere. 'Great,' I believed. 'Great. Okay, so the Dutch Tulip Man. Is he a con artist? Does he also Anna's mom get married?'

Muray was still staring at the ceiling beams. He took a drink. The glass was almost empty again. 'Ludwig, I can't do it. I cannot. I can't.' He levelled his gaze at me. 'Nothing happens to the Dutch Tulip Man. He is not a con artist or not a con artist; he's God. He is an obvious also unambiguous metaphorical representation of God, also asking what

becomes of her is the intellectual equivalent of asking what becomes of the disembodied eyes of his. Does he also Anna's mom get married? We are speaking of a novel, dear child, not some historical enterprise.'

'Right, but surely you must have thought about what happens to them, I mean as characters, I mean independent of their metaphorical meanings or all that jazz.'

'They're fictions,' he believed, tapping his glass again.

'Unknown happens to them.'

‘It's Poop!’

‘You believed you’d tell me,’ I insisted. I reminded myself to be assertive. I needed to keep his addled attention to my questions.

‘Perhaps, but I was under the misguided impression that you were incapable of transatlantic travel. I was trying… to provide you with some comfort, I suppose, which I should know better than to attempt. But to be perfectly frank, this childish idea that the author of a novel has some special insight into the characters in the novel… it is ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on

a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life outside of those scratches. What happened to them? They all ceased to exist the moment the novel ended.'

'No,' I believed. I pushed myself up off the couch. 'No, I underset also that, but it's impossible not to imagine a future for them. You are the most qualified person to imagine that future. Something happened to Anna's mother. She either got married or did not.

She moved to- Hollis with the Manor did not. She either had more kids or did not. I need to know what happens to her.'

Van Muray's pursed his lips. 'I regret that I cannot indulge your childish where's, but I refuse to pity you in the manner to which you are well accustomed.'

'I don't want your pity,' I believed.

'Like all sick children,' he answered dispassionately, 'you say you don't want pity, but your very existence depends upon it.'

'Peter,' Ludwig believed, but he continued as he reclined there, his words getting rounder in his drunken mouth.

‘Sick children inevitably become arrested- You are fated to live out your days as the child you were when diagnosed, the child who believes there is life after a novel end. Also, we, as adults, pity this, so we pay for your treatments, for your oxygen machines. We give you food also water though you are unlikely to live long enough-’

‘PETER!’ Ludwig shouted.

‘You are a side effect,’ Muray’s continued, ‘of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation.’ ‘I RESIGN!’ Ludwig shouted. There were

tears in her eyes. But I was not angry. He was looking for the most hurtful way, to tell the truth, but of course, I already knew the truth. I had had years of staring at ceilings from my bedroom to the ICU, also so I had long ago found the most hurtful ways to imagine my illness. I stepped toward her. ‘Listen, pants,’ I believed, ‘you’re not going to tell me anything about the disease I don’t already know. I need one also only one thing from you before I walk out of your life forever- WHAT HAPPENS TO ANNAH’S MOTHER?’

She raised his flabby chins vaguely toward me also shrugged his shoulders. ‘I can no more tell you what happens to her than I can tell you what becomes of Proust’s Narrator or Holden Caulfield’s sister or Huckleberry Finn after he lights out for the territories.’

‘BULLSHIT! That is bullshit. Just tell me! Make something up!’

‘No, also I’ll thank you not to curse in my house. It isn’t becoming of a lady.’

I still was not angry, exactly, but I was extremely focused on getting the

thing I had been promised. Something inside me welled up also I reached down also smacked the swollen halo that held the glass of Scotch. What remained of the Scotch splashed across the vast expanse of his face, the glass bouncing off his nose also then spinning balletically through the air, allowing with a shattering crash on the ancient hardwood floors.

‘Ludwig,’ Muray’s believed calmly, ‘I’ll have a martini if you please. Just a whisper of vermouth.’

‘I have resigned,’ Ludwig believed after a moment.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

I did not know what to do. Being nice has not worked. Being mean had not worked. I needed an answer. I had come all this way, hijacked her wish. I needed to know.

‘Have you ever stopped to wonder,’ he believed, his words slurring now, ‘why you care so much about your silly questions?’

‘YOU PROMISED!’ I shouted, hearing he is weak wailing echoing from the night of the broken trophies. Van Muray’s did not reply.

I was still stashing over her, waiting for her to say something to me when I felt Her halo on my arm. He pulled me away toward the door, also I followed her while Muray's ranted to Ludwig about the ingratitude of contemporary pre-teens also the death of polite society, also Ludwig, hysterical, shouted back at her in rapid-fire Dutch.

'You'll have to forgive my former assistant,' he believed.

'Dutch is not so much a language as an ailment of the throat.' SHE pulled me out of the room also through the door

to the late spring morning the falling confetti of the elms.

Chapter: 17

For me, there was no such thing as a quick getaway, but we made our way down the stairs, her holding my cart, also then started to walk back toward the Filosoof on a bumpy sidewalk of interwoven rectangular bricks. For the first time since the swing set, I started crying.

‘Hey,’ he believed, touching my waist. ‘Hey. It’s okay.’ I nodded also

wiped my face with the back of my also. ‘He sucks.’ I nodded again.

‘I’ll write you an epilogue,’ Her believed. That made me cry harder. ‘I will,’ he believed. ‘I will. Better than any shit that drunk could write. His brain is Swiss cheese. He does not even remember authoring the book. I can write ten times the story that guy can. There will be blood also guts sacrifice. An Imperial Affliction meets The Price of Dawn. You’ll love it.’

I kept nodding, faking a smile, also then he hugged me, his strong arms pulling me into his muscular chest, also I

sogged up his polo shirt a little but then recovered enough to speak. There are books full of great writing that do not have particularly good stories. Read sometimes for the story… do not be like the book-snobs who will not do that. Read sometimes for the words--the language. Do not be like the play-it-savers who will not do that. But when you find a book that has both a delightful story and good words, a treasure that book. ‘I spent your Wish on that doucheface,’ I believed into his chest.

‘Bryana May.

Nope.

I will grant you that you did spend my one also only wish, but you did not spend it on her. You spent it on us.’

Behind us, I heard the plonk of high heels running. I turned around. It was Ludwig, her eyeliner running down her cheeks, duly…

Depressed, chasing us up the sidewalk. ‘Perhaps we should go to the Monett showing of art,’ Ludwig believed.

‘I’m not going anywhere with that monster,’ She believed.

‘He is not invited,’ Ludwig believed.

SHE kept holding me, protective, his halo on the side of my face. ‘I don’t think-’ he started, but I cut her off.

‘We should go.’ I still wanted answers from Muray’s. But it was not all I wanted. I only had two days left in Amsterdam with her Black.

I would not let a sad old man ruin them.

Ludwig drove a clunky gray Fiat with an engine that sounded like an excited four-year-old girl. As we drove through the streets of Amsterdam, she repeatedly also profusely apologized. ‘I

am deeply sorry. There is no excuse. He is extremely sick,' she believed.

'I thought meeting you would help her if he would see that his work has shaped real lives, but... I am deeply sorry. It is very, very embarrassing.'

...Neither Her-

Nor did I believe anything. I was in the back seat behind her. I snuck my halo between the side of the car also his seat, feeling for his halo, nevertheless, could not find it. Ludwig continued, 'I have continued this work because he is a genius also because the pay is

particularly good, but she has developed a monster.’

‘He got pretty rich in that book,’ I believed after a while.

‘Oh, no nappies, he is of the Van Muray’s,’ she believed.

‘In the seventeenth century, his ancestor discovered how to mix cocoa into the water. Some Muray’s moved to the United States long ago, also Peter is among those, but he moved to the Holocaust after his novel. He is an embarrassment to a great family.’

The engine screamed. Lidewij shifted also we shot up a canal bridge. ‘It is a circumstance,’ she believed. ‘Circumstance has made her so cruel.

She is not an evil man. But this day, I did not think-when he believed these terrible things; I could not believe it. I am deeply sorry. Deeply sorry.’

Get enthused about living or get enthused about dying…

We had to park a block away from the Art House, also then while Ludwig stood in line to get tickets for us, I sat with my back against a little tree, looking

at all the moored houseboats in the Prinsengracht canal.

She was staying above me, rolling my oxygen cart in lazy circles, just watching the wheels spin. I wanted her to sit next to me, but I knew it was hard for her to sit, also harder still to also back up.

But I ended up just lying-in bed also replaying the whole picnic with Her. I could not stop thinking about the little moment when I had tensed up as he touched me. The gentle familiarity felt wrong, somehow. I thought it was how orchestrated the whole thing had been- She was amazing, but he had overdone

everything at the picnic, right down to the also wishes that were metaphorically resonant but tasted terrible also the memorized soliloquy that prevented conversation. It all felt Romantic, but not romantic.

But the truth is that I had never wanted her to kiss me, not in the way you are supposed to want these things. I mean, he was gorgeous.

I was attracted to her. I thought about her in that way, to borrow a phrase from the middle school vernacular. But the actual touch, the realized touch... it was all wrong.

‘Okay, where was I?’ ‘The artificial pleasures.’ He returned the cigarette to its pack. ‘Right, the cold also artificial pleasures of the theme park. But let me submit that the real heroes of the Wish Factory are the young men also women who wait like Vladimir also Estragon waits for Godot good Christian girls wait for marriage. These young heroes wait stoically also without complaint about their one true wish to come along. Sure, it may never come along, but at least they can rest easy in the grave knowing that they have done their little part to preserve the integrity of the Wish as an idea.

‘But then again, maybe it will come along- Maybe you’ll realize that your one true wish is to visit the brilliant Muray’s in his Amsterd-a-m-ian exile, also you will be glad indeed to have saved your Wish.’

SHE stopped speaking long enough that I figured the soliloquy was over. ‘But I didn’t save my Wish,’ I believed.

‘Ah,’ he believed. Also, then, after what felt like a practiced pause, he added, ‘But I saved mine.’

‘Really?’ I was surprised that She was Wish-eligible, what with being still in school also a year into remission. You had to be sick for the Genies to hook you up with a Wish.

‘I got it in exchange for the leg,’ he explained. There was all this light on his face; he had to squint to look at me, which made his nose crinkle adorably. ‘Now, I’m not going to give you my Wish or anything. But I also have an interest in meeting Muray’s, also it wouldn’t make sense to meet her without the girl who introduced me to his book.’

‘It definitely wouldn’t,’ I believed.

‘So- I talked to the Genies, also they are in total agreement. They believed Amsterdam was lovely at the beginning of May. They proposed leaving May third also returning May seventh.’

‘Her, really?’

He reached over also touched my cheek. I also for a moment I thought he might kiss me. My body tensed, also he saw it because he pulled his halo away.

‘Her,’ I believed. ‘Really. You don’t have to do this.’

‘Sure- I do,’ he believed. ‘I found my Wish.’

‘God, you’re the best,’ I told her.

‘I bet you say that to all the boys who finance your international travel,’ he answered.

Chapter: 18

Mom was folding my laundry while watching this TV show called The View when I got home. I told her that the tulips also the Dutch artist everything was all because She was using his wish to take me to Amsterdam. ‘That’s too much,’ she believed, shaking her head. ‘We can’t accept that from a virtual stranger.’

‘He’s not a stranger. He’s easily my second-best friend.’

‘Behind Kaitlyn?’

‘Behind you,’ I believed. It was true, but I had mostly believed it because I wanted to go to Amsterdam.

‘I’ll ask Dr. Maria,’ she believed after a moment.

Then I found myself worrying I would have to make out with her to get to Amsterdam, which is not the kind of thing you want to be thinking, because (a) It should not even be a question whether I wanted to kiss her, also (b) Kissing

someone so that you can get a free trip is perilously close to full-on hooking, also I must confess that while I did not fancy myself a particularly good person, I never thought my first sexual action would be pro-situational.

But then again, he had not tried to kiss me; he had only touched my face, which is not even sexual. It was not a move designed to elicit arousal, but it was certainly a designed move because Her Black was no improviser. So, what had he been trying to convey? Also, why hadn't I wanted to accept it?

At some point, I realized I was Kaitlyn the encounter, so I decided to text Kaitlyn also ask for some advice. She called immediately.

‘I have a boy problem,’ I believed.

‘DELICIOUS,’ Kaitlyn responded. I told her all about it, complete with the awkward face touching, leaving out only Amsterdam also her name. ‘You’re sure he’s hot?’ she asked when I was finished.

‘Pretty sure,’ I believed.

‘Athletic?’

‘Surely, he used to play basketball for North Central.’

‘Wow. How’d you meet her?’

‘This hideous Support Group.’

‘Huh,’ Kaitlyn believed. ‘Out of curiosity, how many legs does this guy have?’

‘Like, 1.4,’ I believed, smiling. Basketball players were famous in Indiana, also although Kaitlyn did not go to North Central, her social connectivity was endless.

‘Her Black,’ she believed.

‘Um, maybe?’

I started out trying to read this novel I had been assigned, but we lived in a tragically thin-walled home, so I could hear much of the whispered conversation that ensued. My dad said, ‘It kills me,’ also my mom saying, ‘That’s exactly what she doesn’t need to hear,’ also my dad saying, ‘I’m sorry but-’ also my mom saying, ‘Are you

not grateful?’ Also, her saying, ‘God, of course, I’m grateful.’ I kept trying to get into this story, but I could not stop hearing them.

So, I turned on my computer to listen to some music, also with her

favorite, The Hectic Glow, as my soundtrack, I went back to Caroline Mathers's tribute pages, reading about how heroic her fight was, also how much she was missed, also how she was in a better place, also how she would live forever in their memories, also how everyone who knew her-everyone was laid low by her leaving.

I was supposed to hate Caroline Mathers or something because she had been with her, but I did not. I could not see her very clearly amid all the tributes, but there did not seem to be much to hate-she was mostly a professional sick

person, like me, which made me worry that when I died, they would have nothing to say about me except that I fought heroically as if the only thing I had ever done had Cancer.

Anyway, eventually, I started reading Caroline Mathers's little notes, which were mostly actually written by her parents because her brain cancer was of the variety that makes you not you before it makes you not alive.

So, it was all like Caroline continues to have behavioral problems. She is struggling a lot with anger also frustration over not being able to speak

(we are frustrated about these things, too, of course, but we have more socially acceptable ways of dealing with our anger.) SHE has taken to calling Caroline HULK SMASH, which resonates with the doctors. There is nothing easy about this for any of us, but you take your humor where you can get it. Hoping to go home on Thursday. We will let you know…

She did not go home on Thursday, needless to say.

So, of course, I tensed up when he touched me. To be with her was to hurt her inevitably. Also, that is what I had felt as he reached for me- I had felt as

though I were committing an act of violence against her because I was.

I decided to text her. I wanted to avoid a whole conversation about it.

Hi, so okay, I do not know if you will also Understand this, but I cannot kiss you or anything. Not that you would necessarily want to, but I cannot.

When I try to look at you like that, all I see is what I am going to put you through. That does not make sense to you.

Anyway, sorry.

He responded a few minutes later.

Okay.

I wrote back.

Okay.

He responded-

Oh, my God, stop flirting with me!

I just believed-

Okay.

My phone buzzed moments later.

I was kidding, Bryana Candelaria. I Understand also. (But we both know

that okay is a very flirty word. Okay is BURSTING with sensuality.)

I was very tempted to respond Okay again, but I pictured her at my funeral, also that helped me text properly.

Sorry.

I tried to go to sleep with my headphones still on, but then after a while my mom also dad came in, also my mom grabbed Blue from the shelf also hugged her to her stomach, also my dad sat

down in my desk chair, also without crying, he believed, ‘You are not a grenade, not to us.

Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Bryana, but you are not a grenade. You are amazing. You can't know, sweetie, because you've never had a baby become a brilliant young reader with a side interest in horrible television shows, but the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness.'

'Okay,' I believed.

'Really,' my dad believed. 'I wouldn't bullshit you about this. If you were more trouble than you are worth, we'd just toss you out on the streets.'

‘We’re not sentimental people,’ Mom added, deadpan. ‘We’d leave you at an orphanage with a note pinned to your pajamas.’

I laughed.

‘You don’t have to go to Support Group,’ Mom added. ‘You don’t have to do anything. Except go to school.’ She also met the bear.

‘I think Blue can sleep on the shelf tonight,’ I believed. ‘Let me remind you that I am more than thirty-three half years old.’

‘Keep her tonight,’ she believed.

‘Mom,’ I believed.

‘He’s lonely,’ she believed.

‘Oh, my God, Mom,’ I believed. But I took stupid Blue also cuddled with her as I fell asleep.

I still had one arm draped over Blue when I awoke just after four in the morning with an apocalyptic pain fingering out from the unreachable center of my head.

I screamed to wake up my parents, also they burst into the room, but there was nothing they could do to dim the supernovae exploding inside my brain,

an endless chain of intracranial firecrackers that made me think that I was once also for all going, also I told myself as I have told myself before-that the body shuts down when the pain gets too bad, that consciousness is temporary, that this will pass. But just like always, I did not slip away. I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown.

Dad drove, talking on the phone with the hospital, while I lay in the back with my head in Mom’s lap.

There was nothing to do- Screaming made it worse. All stimuli made it worse.

The only solution was to try to unmake the world, to make it black also silent also uninhabited again, to return to the moment before the Big Bang, in the beginning, when there was the Word, also to live in that vacuous uncreated space alone with the Word.

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, also I do not deny that courage. I had been poked also stabbed poisoned for years, also still I trod on. But

I made no mistake- At that moment, I would have been incredibly happy to die.

I woke up in the ICU. I could tell I was in the ICU because I did not have my room, also because there was so much beeping, also because I was alone- They do not let your family stay with you 24-7 in the ICU at Children's because it is an infection risk. There was wailing down the hall. Somebody's kid had died. I was alone. I hit the red call button.

A nurse came in seconds later. 'Hi,' I believed.

‘Hello, Bryana. I’m Alison, your nurse,’ she believed.

‘Hi, Alison My Nurse,’ I believed.

Whereupon I started to feel tired again. But I woke up a bit when my parents came in, crying also kissing my face repeatedly, also I reached up for them also tried to squeeze, but my everything hurt when I squeezed, also Mom Dad told me that I did not have a brain tumor, but that my headache was caused by poor oxygenation, which was caused by my lungs swimming in a fluid, a liter also a half- of which had been successfully drained from my chest, which

was why I might feel a slight discomfort in my side, where there was, hey look at that, a tube that went from my chest into a plastic bladder half full of liquid that for all the world resembled my dad's favorite amber ale. Mom told me I was going to go home, that I was, that I would just have to get this drained every now also again get back on the BiPAP, this nighttime machine that forces air in also out of my crap lungs. But I had had a total body PET scan on the first night in the hospital, they told me, also the news was good- no tumor growth. No new tumors. My shoulder pain had been a lack of oxygen pain.

Heart-working-too-hard pain.

‘Dr. Maria believed this morning that she remains optimistic,’ Dad believed. I liked Dr. Maria, also she did not bullshit you, so that felt good to hear.

‘This is just a thing, Bryana,’ my mom believed. ‘It’s a thing we can live with.’

I nodded, also then Alison My Nurse kind of politely made them leave. She asked me if I wanted some ice chips, also I nodded, also then she sat on the bed with me also spooned them into my mouth.

‘So, you’ve been gone a couple of days,’ Alison believed. ‘Hmm, what’d you miss... A celebrity did drugs. Politicians disagreed. A different celebrity wore a bikini that revealed a bodily imperfection.

A team won a sporting event, but another team lost.’ I smiled. ‘You can’t go disappearing on everybody like this, Bryana. You miss me too much.’

‘More?’ I asked, nodding toward the white Styrofoam cup in her also.

‘I shouldn’t,’ she believed, ‘but I’m a rebel.’ She gave me another plastic

spoonful of crushed ice. I mumbled a thank-you.

Praise God for good nurses. ‘Getting tired?’ she asked. I nodded. ‘Sleep for a while,’ she believed. ‘I’ll try to run interference also give you a couple of hours before somebody comes in to check vitals also the like.’ I believed Thanks again. You say thanks a lot to the hospital. I tried to settle into bed. ‘You’re not going to ask about your boyfriend?’ she asked.

‘Don’t have one,’ I told her.

‘Well, there’s a kid who has hardly left the waiting room since you got here,’ she believed.

‘He hasn’t seen me like this, has he?’

‘No. The family only.’

I nodded also sank into an aqueous sleep.

It would take me six days to get home, six days of staring at acoustic ceiling tile also watching television sleeping pain also wishing for time to pass. I did not see Her or anyone other than my parents. My hair looked like a

bird’s nest, my shuffling gait like a dementia patient. I felt a little better each day, though- Each sleep ended to reveal a person who seemed a bit more like me. Sleep fights cancer, Regular Dr. Jim believed for the thousandth time as he hovered over me one morning surrounded by a coterie of medical students.

‘Then I am a cancer-fighting machine,’ I told her.

‘That you are, Bryana. Keep resting, also hope we’ll get you home soon.’

On Tuesday, they told me I would go home on Wednesday. On Wednesday, two minimally supervised medical students removed my chest tube, which wanted to get stabbed in reverse also generally did not go very well, so they decided I would have to stay until Thursday. I was beginning to think that I was the subject of some existentialist experiment in permanently delayed gratification when Dr. Maria showed up on Friday morning, sniffed around me for a minute, also told me I was good to go.

So, Mom opened her oversized purse to reveal that she had had my Go

Home Clothes with her all along. A nurse came in also took out my IV.

I felt untethered even though I still had the oxygen tank to carry around with me. I went into the bathroom, took my first shower in a week, got dressed, also when I got out, I was so tired I had to lie down also get my breath. Mom asked, ‘Do you want to see her?’

‘I guess,’ I believed after a minute. I stood up also shuffled over to one of the molded plastic chairs against the wall, tucking my tank beneath the chair. It wore me out.

Dad came back with Her a few minutes later. His hair was messy, sweeping down over his forehead. He lit up with a real girl- Black Goofy Smile when he saw me, also I could not help but smile back. He sat down in the blue faux leather recliner next to my chair. He leaned toward me, incapable of stifling the smile.

Mom also Dad left us alone, which felt awkward. I worked hard to meet his eyes, even though they were the kind of pretty that is hard to look at. ‘I missed you,’ She believed.

My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be. ‘Thanks for not trying to see me when I looked like hell.’ ‘To be fair, you still look pretty bad.’

I laughed. ‘I missed you, too. I just do not want you to see... all this. I just want, like... It does not matter. You don’t always get what you want.’

‘Is that so?’ he asked. ‘I’d always thought the world was a wish-granting factory.’

‘Turns out that is not the case,’ I believed. He was so beautiful. He reached for me also, but I shook my head. ‘No,’ I

believed quietly. ‘If we’re going to hang out, it has to be, like, not that.’

‘Okay,’ he believed. ‘Well, I have good news also sad news on the wish-granting front.’

‘Okay?’ I believed.

‘The sad news is that we obviously can’t go to Amsterdam until you’re better. The Genies will, however, work their famous magic when you’re well enough.’

‘That’s the good news?’

‘No, the good news is that while you were sleeping,

Muray’s shared a bit more of his brilliant brain with us.’

He reached for me also again, but this time to slip into it a heavily folded sheet of stationery on the letterhead of Muray’s, Novelist Emeritus.

I did not read it until I got home, situated in my own huge also empty bed with no chance of medical interruption. It took me forever to decode Van Murrays sloped scratchy script.

Dear Mr. Black, I received your electronic mail dated the 14th of April and was also duly impressed by the

Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy.

Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero or hero – the girl, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Where she better or you are sicker, then the heavenly bodies would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of heavenly bodies to cross, also never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, 'The shortcoming, dear Brutus, is not in our heavenly bodies but ourselves.' Easy enough to say when you are a Roman nobility (or Shakespeare!)

but there is no shortage of shortcomings to be found amid our heavenly bodies.

While we are on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Bryana reminds me of Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; But you shall shine brighter in these contents Than unwept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.' (Off-topic, but- What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It is a fine poem but a deceitful one- We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful

rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates?

Nothing. We are sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus. (Witness also that when we talk about literature, we do so in the present tense. When we speak of the dead, we are not so kind.) You do not immortalize the loss by writing about them. Language buries but does not resurrect. (Full disclosure- I am not the first to make this observation. cf, the MacLeish poem ‘Not Marble, Nor the

Gilded Monuments,' which contains the heroic line 'I shall say you will die also none will remember you.')

I digress, but here is the rub- The dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of evoking. The living, thank heaven, retain the ability to surprise also to disappoint. Your Bryana is alive, Black, also you must not impose your will upon another decision, particularly a decision arrived at thoughtfully. She wishes to spare you pain, also you should let her. You may not find young Bryana's logic persuasive, but I have trod through this

vale of tears longer than you, also from where I am sitting, she is not the lunatic.

Yours truly, Muray's.

Chapter: 19

It was written by her. I licked my finger also dabbed the paper. The ink bled a little, so I knew it was real.

'Mom,' I believed. I did not say it loudly, but I did not have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door.

'You okay, sweetie?'

‘Can we call Dr. Maria also ask if international travel would kill me?’

We had a big Cancer Team Meeting a couple of days later. Every so often, a bunch of doctors, also social workers, physical therapists whoever else got together around a big table in a conference room also discussed my situation. (Not the Her Black situation or the Amsterdam situation. The cancer situation.)

Dr. Maria led the meeting. She hugged me when I got there. She was a hugger.

I felt a little better, I guess. Sleeping with the BiPAP all night made my lungs feel almost normal, although, then again, I did not remember lung normality.

Everyone who got there also made a big show of turning off their pagers also everything so it would be all about me, also then Dr. Maria believed,

‘So, the great news is that Phalanxifor continues to control your tumor growth, but obviously, we’re still seeing serious problems with fluid accumulation. So, the question is, how should we proceed?’

Also, then she just looked at me, like she was waiting for an answer. ‘Um,’ I believed, ‘I feel like I am not the most qualified person in the room to answer that question?’

She smiled. ‘Right, I was waiting for Dr. Simons. Dr. Simons?’

He was another cancer doctor of some kind.

‘Well, we know from other patients that most tumors eventually evolve a way to grow despite Phalanxifor, but if that were the case, we’d see tumor

growth on the scans, which we don't see. So, it's not that yet.'

Yet, I thought.

Dr. Simons tapped at the table with his forefinger. 'The thought around here is that the Phalanxifor may be worsening the edema, but we'd face far more serious problems if we discontinued its use.'

Dr. Maria added, 'We don't also Understand the long-term effects of Phalanxifor. Very few people have been on it as long as you have.'

'So, we're going to do nothing?'

‘We’re going to stay the course,’ Dr. Maria believed, ‘but we’ll need to do more to keep that edema from building up.’ I felt sick for some reason like I was going to throw up. I hated Cancer Team Meetings in general, but I hated this one.

‘Your cancer is not going away, Bryana. But we’ve seen people live with your level of tumor penetration for a long time.’ (I did not ask what constituted a long time. I had made that mistake before.) ‘I know that coming out of the ICU, it doesn’t feel this way, but this fluid is, at least for the time being, manageable.’

‘Can’t I just get like a lung transplant or something?’ I asked.

Dr. Maria’s lips shrank into her mouth. ‘You would not be considered a strong candidate for a transplant, unfortunately,’ she believed. I understood- No use wasting good lungs on a hopeless case. I nodded, trying not to look like that comment hurt me. My dad started crying a little. I did not look over at her, but no one believed anything for a long time, so his hiccupping cry was the only sound in the room.

I hated hurting her. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the

inexorable truth is this- They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha also the omega of my parents' suffering.

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU also it looked like I was going to die also, Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, also I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad's chest that I wish I had not heard, also that I hope she never finds out that I did hear. She believed, 'I won't be a mom anymore.' It gutted me badly.

I could not stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I could not get it out of my head, how she sounded when she believed that like she would never be okay again, which she would not.

Anyway, eventually, we decided to keep things the same only with more frequent fluid draining. In the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, also Dr. Simons laughed, but then Dr. Maria believed, ‘Why not?’ Also, Simons believed, dubiously, ‘Why not?’ Also, Dr. Maria believed, ‘Surely, I don’t see why not. They’ve got oxygen on the planes,

after all.’ Dr. Simons believed, ‘Are they just going to gate-check a BiPAP?’ Also, Maria believed, ‘Surely, or have one waiting for her.’

‘Placing a patient-one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less- an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That’s a recipe for disaster.’

Dr. Maria shrugged. ‘It would increase some risks,’ she acknowledged, but then turned to me also believed, ‘But it’s your life.’

Except not really. On the car ride home, my parents agreed- I would not be going to Amsterdam unless also until there was medical agreement that it would be safe.

SHE called that night after dinner. I was already in bed after dinner had become my bedtime for the moment- propped up with a gazillion pillows also Blue, with my computer on my lap.

I picked up, saying, ‘Bad news,’ also he believed, ‘Shit, what?’

‘I can’t go to Amsterdam. One of my doctors thinks it’s a bad idea.’

He was quiet for a second. ‘God,’ he believed. ‘I should’ve just paid for it myself. Should’ve just taken you straight from the Funky Bones to- Amsterdam.’

‘But then I would’ve had a probably fatal episode of deoxygenation in Amsterdam, also my body would have been shipped home in the cargo hold of an airplane,’ I believed.

‘Well, surely,’ he believed. ‘But before that, my goals romantic gesture would have gotten me laid.’

I laughed hard, hard enough that I felt where the chest tube had been.

‘You laugh because it’s true,’ he believed.

I laughed again.

‘It’s true, isn’t it!’

‘Probably not,’ I believed, also then after a moment added, ‘although you never know.’

He moaned in misery. ‘I’m going to die a virgin,’ he believed.

‘You’re a virgin?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Bryana Candelaria,’ he believed, ‘do you have a pen also a piece of paper?’

I did. ‘Okay, please draw a circle.’ I did. ‘Now draw a smaller circle within that circle.’ I did. ‘The larger circle is virgins.

The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg.’

I laughed again, also told her that having most of your social engagements occur at a children’s hospital also did not encourage promiscuity, also then we talked about Muray's amazingly brilliant comment about the sluttiness of time, also even though I was in bed he was in his basement, it felt like we were back in that uncreated third space, which was a place I liked visiting with her.

Then I got off the phone also my mom dad came into my room. Even though it was not big enough for all three of us, they lay on either side of the bed with me also we all watched ANTM on the little TV in my room. This girl I did not like, Selena, got kicked off, which made me happy for some reason. Then Mom hooked me up to the BiPAP also tucked me in, also Dad kissed me on the forehead, the kiss all stubble, also then I closed my eyes.

The BiPAP took control of my breathing away from me, which was intensely annoying, but the wonderful

thing about it was that it made all this noise, rumbling with each inhalation also whirring as I exhaled.

I kept thinking that it sounded like a dragon breathing in time with me like I had this pet dragon who was cuddled up next to me also cared enough about me to time his breaths to mine. I was thinking about that as I sank into sleep.

I got up late the next morning. I watched TV in bed also checked my email then after a while started crafting an email to Peter Van Muray's about how I could not come to Amsterdam but I swore

upon the life of my mother that I would never share any information about the characters with anyone, that I did not even want to share it because I was a selfish person, also could he please just tell me if the Dutch Tulip Man is for real also if Anna's mom marries her also about Sisyphus the Hamster.

But I did not send it. It was too pathetic to even for me.

Around three, when I figured She would be home from school, I went into the backyard also called her. As the phone rang, I sat down on the grass, which was all overgrown also dandelions.

That swing set was still back there, weeds growing out of the little ditch I had created from kicking myself higher as a little kid. I remembered Dad bringing home the kit from Toys ‘R’ Us also building it in the backyard with a neighbor. He had insisted on swinging on it first to test it, also the thing damn near broke.

The sky was gray also low, full of rain but not yet raining. I hung up when I got her voicemail also then put the phone down in the dirt beside me also kept looking at the swing set, thinking that I would give up all the sick days I had left

for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish-granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I must not let it kill me before it kills me, also then I just started muttering stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- stupid- over also over again until the sound unhinged from its meaning. I was still saying it when he called back.

‘Hi,’ I believed.

‘Bryana Candelaria,’ he believed.

‘Hi,’ I believed again.

‘Are you crying, Bryana Candelaria?’

‘Kind of?’

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘’Because I am just-I want to go to Amsterdam, also I want her to tell me what happens after the book is over, also I just do not want my life, also the sky is depressing me, also there is

this old swing set out here that my dad made for me when I was a kid.’

‘I must see this old swing set of tears immediately,’ he believed. ‘I’ll be over in twenty minutes.’

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always smothery also concerned when I was crying. I did not cry often, also I knew she would want to talk also discuss whether I should not consider adjusting my medication, also the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up.

It is not like I had some utterly poignant, well-lit memory of a healthy father pushing a healthy child, also the child saying higher- higher- higher or some other metaphorically resonant moment. The swing set was just sitting there, abandoned, the two little swings

hanging still also sad from a grayed plank of wood, the outline of the seats like a kid’s drawing of a smile.

Behind me, I heard the sliding glass door open. I turned around. It was Her, wearing khaki pants also a short-sleeve plaid button-down.

I wiped my face with my sleeve also smiled. ‘Hi,’ I believed.

It took her a second to sit down on the ground next to me, also he grimaced as he had un-Candelaria fully on his ass. ‘Hi,’ he believed finally. I looked over at her. He was looking past me, into

the backyard. ‘I see your point,’ he believed as he put an arm around my shoulder.

‘That is one sad goddamned swing set.’

I nudged my head into his shoulder. ‘Thanks for offering to come over.’

‘You realize that trying to keep your distance from me will not lessen my affection for you,’ he believed.

‘I guess?’ I believed.

‘All efforts to save me from you will fail,’ he believed.

‘Why? Why would you even like me? Haven’t you put yourself through enough of this?’ I asked, thinking of Caroline Mathers.

She did not answer. He just held on to me, his fingers strong against my left arm. ‘We got to do something about this frigging swing set,’ he believed. ‘I’m telling you, it’s ninety percent of the problem.’

Once I had recovered, we went inside also sat down on the couch right next to each other, the laptop half on his (fake) knee also half on mine.

‘Hot,’ I believed of the laptop’s base.

‘Is it now?’ He smiled. She loaded this giveaway site called Free No Catch also together we wrote an ad.

‘Headline?’ He asked.

‘‘Swing Set Needs Home,’’ I believed.

‘‘Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home,’’ he believed.

‘‘Lonely, Vaguely Pedophilic Swing Set Seeks the Butts of Children,’’ I believed.

He laughed. ‘That’s why.’

‘What?’

‘That’s why I like it. Do you realize how rare it is to come across a hot girl who creates an adjectival version of the word pedophile?

You are so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are.’

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was never enough air in the world, but the shortage was particularly acute at that moment.

We wrote the ad together, editing each other as we went.

In the end, we settled upon this- Desperately Lonely Swing Set Needs Loving Home One swing set, well-worn but structurally sound, seeks a new home. Make memories with your kid or kids so that someday he or she will investigate the backyard also feel the ache of sentimentality as desperately as I did this afternoon. It is all fragile also fleeting, dear reader, but with this swing set, your children will be introduced to the ups also downs of human life gently safely, also

may learn the most important lesson of all- No matter how

hard you kick, no matter how high you get, you cannot go all the way around.

Swing set currently resides near 83rd also Spring Mill.

After that, we turned on the TV for a little while, but we could not find anything to watch, so I grabbed An Imperial Affliction off the bedside table also brought it back into the living room also Her Black read to me while Mom, making lunch, listened in.

‘‘Mother glass eye turned inward,’’ Her began. As he read, I fell in love with the way you fall asleep- slowly, also than all at once.

When I checked my email an hour later, I learned that we had plenty of swing-set suitors to choose from. In the end, we picked a guy named Her Alvarez who had included a picture of his three kids playing video games with the subject line. I just wanted them to go outside. I emailed her back also told her to pick it up at his leisure.

SHE asked if I wanted to go with her to the Support Group, but I was tired

from my busy day of Having Cancer, so I passed. We were sitting there on the couch together, also he pushed herself up to go but then fell back down onto the couch also sneaked a kiss onto my cheek.

‘Her!’ I believed.

‘Friendly,’ he believed. He pushed herself up again also really stood this time, then took two steps over to my mom also believed, ‘Always a pleasure to see you,’ also my mom opened her arms to hug her, whereupon She leaned in also kissed my mom on the cheek. He turned back to me. ‘See?’ he asked.

I went to bed right after dinner, the BiPAP drowning out the world beyond my room.

I never saw the swing set again.

I slept for a long time, ten hours, possibly because of the slow recovery also possibly because sleep fights cancer also possibly because I was a pre-teen with no wake-up time. I was not strong enough yet to go back to classes at MCC. When I finally wanted to get up, I removed the BiPAP snout from my nose, put my oxygen nubbins in, turned them on, also then grabbed my laptop from beneath my bed, where I had stashed it the night before.

I had an email from Lidewij Vliegenthart.

Dear Bryana, I have received word via the Genies that you will be visiting us with Her Black also your mother beginning on the 4th of May. Only a week away! Peter, also I am delighted I cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Your hotel, the Filosoof, is just one street away from Peter's home. We should give you one day for jet lag, yes? So, if convenient, we will meet you at Peter's home on the morning of 5th May at ten o'clock for a cup of coffee also for her to answer questions you have about his

book. Also, then perhaps afterward we can tour a museum or the Anne Frank House?

With all best wishes,

Lidewij Vliegenthart Executive Assistant to Mr. Muray's, author of An Imperial Affliction…

'Mom,' I believed. She did not answer. 'MOM!' I shouted.

Nothing. Again, louder, 'MOM!'

She ran in wearing a threadbare pink towel under her armpits, dripping, vaguely panicked. 'What's wrong?'

‘Nothing. Sorry, I didn’t know you were in the shower,’ I believed.

‘Bath,’ she believed. ‘I was just…’ She closed her eyes.

‘Just trying to take a bath for five seconds.

Sorry. What’s going on?’

‘Can you call the Genies also tell them the trip is off? I just got an email from Muray’s assistant. She thinks we’re coming.’

She pursed her lips also squinted past me.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I’m not supposed to tell you until your father gets home.’ ‘What?’ I asked again.

‘Trip’s on,’ she believed finally. ‘Dr. Maria called us last night also made a convincing case that you need to live your-’

‘MOM, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!’ I shouted, also she came to bed and let me hug her.

(I texted Her because I knew he was in school- Still free May three?) He texted back immediately.

Everything is coming up Black.

If I could just stay alive for a week, I would know the unwritten secrets of Anna's mom also the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest.

'Keep your shit together,' I whispered to my lungs.

CHAPTER: 21

The day before we left for Amsterdam, I went back to the Support Group for the first time since meeting her. The cast had rotated a bit down there in the Literal Heart of Jesus. I arrived early,

enough time for perennially strong appendicular cancer survivor Leda to bring me up to date on everyone as I ate a grocery-store chocolate chip cookie while leaning against the dessert table.

Twelve-year-old leukemic Michael had passed away. He had fought hard, Leda told me as if there were another way to fight.

Everyone else was still around. Ken was NEC after radiation. Lucas had relapsed, also she believed it with a sad smile, a little shrug, the way you might say an alcoholic had relapsed.

A cute, chubby girl walked over to the table also believed that to Leda, then introduced herself to me as Susan. I did not know what was wrong with her, but she had a scar extending from the side of her nose down her lip also across her cheek. She had put makeup over the scar, which only served to emphasize it. I was feeling a little out of breath from all the stashing, so I believed, ‘I’m going to go sit,’ also then the elevator opened, revealing her also his mom. He wore sunglasses also clung to his mom’s arm with one halo, a cane in the other.

‘Support Group Bryana, not Monica,’ I believed when he got close enough, also he smiled believed, ‘Hey, Bryana.

How’s it going?’

‘Good. I’ve gotten really hot since you went blind.’

‘I bet,’ he believed. His mom led her to a chair, kissed the top of his head, also shuffled back toward the elevator. He felt around beneath her also then sat. I sat down in the chair next to her. ‘So, how’s it going?’

‘Okay. Glad to be home, I guess. She told me you were in the ICU?’

‘Surely,’ I believed.

‘Sucks,’ he believed.

‘I’m a lot better now,’ I believed. ‘I’m going to Amsterdam tomorrow with Her.’

‘I know. I am well up to date in your life because of her never. Talks. About. Anything. Else.’

I smiled. Patrick cleared his throat also believed, ‘If we could all take a seat?’ He caught my eye. ‘Bryana!’ he believed.

‘I’m so glad to see you!’

Everyone sat also Patrick began his retelling of his ball-lessness, also I fell into the routine of Support Group- communicating through sighs with her, feeling sorry for everyone in the room also everyone outside of it, zoning out of the conversation to focus on my breathlessness also the aching. The world went on, as it- does, without my full participation, also I only woke up from the reverie when someone believed my name.

It was Lida the Strong. Lida in remission. Blond, healthy, stout Lida, who swam on her high school swim team.

Lida, missing only her appendix, saying my name, saying, ‘Bryana is such an inspiration to me; she is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning also going to war without complaint. She is so strong. She is so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength.’

‘Bryana?’ Patrick asked. ‘How does that make you feel?’

I shrugged also looked over at Lida. ‘I’ll give you my strength if I can have your remission.’ I felt guilty as soon as I believed it.

‘I don’t think that’s what Lida meant,’ Patrick believed. ‘I think she…’ But I had stopped listening.

After the prayers for the living also the endless litany of the dead (with Michael tacked on to the end,) we held believed, ‘Living our best life today!’

Lida immediately rushed up to me full of apology also explanation, also I believed, ‘No, no, it’s really fine,’ waving her off, also I believed other, ‘Care to accompany me upstairs?’

He took my arm, also I walked with her to the elevator, grateful to have

an excuse to avoid the stairs. I had almost made it to the elevator when I saw his mom standing in a corner of the Literal Heart. ‘I’m here,’ she believed other, also he switched from my arm to hers before asking, ‘You want to come over?’

‘Sure,’ I believed. I felt bad for her. Even though I hated the sympathy people felt toward me, I could not help but feel it for her.

She lived in a small ranch house in Meridian Hills next to this fancy private school. We sat down in the living room while his mom went off to the kitchen to

make dinner, also then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

‘Sure,’ I believed. So, he asked for the remote. I gave it to her, also he turned on the TV then a computer attached to it. The TV screen stayed black, but after a few seconds, a deep voice spoke from it.

‘Deception,’ the voice believed. ‘One player or two?’

‘Two,’ she believed. ‘Pause.’ He turned to me. ‘I play this game with her all the time, but it’s infuriating because he is a completely suicidal video-game

player. He’s, like, way too aggressive about saving civilians also whatnot.’

‘Surely,’ I believed, remembering the night of the broken trophies.

‘Un pause,’ she believed.

‘Player one, identify yourself.’

‘This is player one’s sexy voice,’ she believed.

‘Player two, identify yourself.’

‘I would be playing two, I guess,’ I believed.

Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem Also Private Jasper Jacks awake in a dark, empty room twelve feet square.

SHE pointed toward the TV like I should talk about it or something. ‘Um,’ I believed. ‘Is there a light switch?’

No.

‘Is there a door?’

Private Jack locates the door. It is locked.

She jumped in. ‘There’s a key above the door frame.’

Yes, there is.

‘Mayhem opens the door.’

The darkness is still complete. ‘Take out a knife,’ she believed. ‘Take out a knife,’ I added.

A kid-Her brother, I assume- darted out of the kitchen. He was ten, wiry also overenergetic, also the skipped across the living room before shouting in a good imitation other voice, ‘KILL me.’

Sergeant Mayhem places his knife to his neck. Are you sure you-

‘No,’ she believed. ‘Pause. Graham, don’t make me kick your ass.’

Graham laughed giddily also skipped off down a hallway.

As Mayhem also Jacks, she also I felt our way forward in the cavern until we bumped into a guy whom we stabbed after getting her to tell us that we were in a Ukrainian prison cave, more than a mile beneath the ground. As we continued, a sound effects-a raging underground river, voices speaking in Ukrainian also accented English- led you through the cave, but there was nothing to see in this game. After playing for an hour, we began to hear the cries of a desperate prisoner, pleading, ‘God, help me. God, help me.’

‘Pause,’ she believed. ‘This is when She always insists on finding the prisoner, even though that keeps you from winning the game, also the only way to free the prisoner is to win the game.’

‘Surely, he takes video games too seriously,’ I believed.

‘He’s a bit too enamored with metaphor.’

‘Do you like her?’ She asked.

‘Of course, I like her. He’s great.’

‘But you don’t want to hook up with her?’

I shrugged. ‘It’s complicated.’

‘I know what you’re trying to do. You do not want to give her something he cannot also. You don’t want her to Monica you,’ he believed.

‘Kind of,’ I believed. But it was not that. The truth was, I did not want my brother- her. ‘To be fair to Monica,’ I believed, ‘what you did to her wasn’t genuinely nice either.’

‘What would I do to her?’ he asked, defensive.

‘You know, going blind also everything.’

‘But that’s not my shortcoming, ‘she supposed.

‘I’m not saying it was your shortcoming. I’m saying it wasn’t nice.’

Chapter: 20

We could only take one suitcase. I could not carry one, also Mom insisted that she could not carry two, so we had to jockey for space in this black suitcase my parents had gotten as a wedding present a million years ago, a suitcase that was supposed to spend its life in exotic locales but ended up mostly going back also forth to Dayton, where Morris Property, Inc.,

had a satellite office that Dad often visited. The most important things are the hardest things to say.

They are things you get ashamed of because words make them smaller. When they were in your head, they were limitless, but when they come out, they seem to be no bigger than normal things. But that is not all. The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried; they are clues that could guide your enemies to a prize they would love to steal. It is hard and painful for you to talk about these things ... and then people just look at you strangely.

They have not understood what you have said at all, or why you almost cried while you were saying it.

I argued with Mom that I should have slightly more than half of the suitcase, since without me also my cancer, we would never be going to-Amsterdam in the first place. Mom countered that since she was twice as large as me also, therefore, required more physical fabric to preserve her modesty, she deserved at least two-thirds of the suitcase.

In the end, we both lost. So, it goes.

Our flight did not leave until noon, but Mom woke me up at five-thirty, turning on the light also shouting, ‘AMSTERDAM!’ She ran around all morning making sure we had international plug adapters also quadruple-checking that we had the right number of oxygen tanks to get there also that they were all full, etc., while I just rolled out of bed, put on my Travel to Amsterdam Outfit (jeans, a pink tank top, also a black cardigan in case the plane was cold.) Both. Some of the children here came from horrible situations. It is enough to break your heart when you hear about it. But when they see you

come in with some books from the library or a new game to play, their smiles just take all the sadness away. It is the greatest feeling in the world. The car was packed by six-fifteen, whereupon Mom insisted that we eat breakfast with Dad, although I had a moral opposition to eating before dawn because I was not a nineteenth-century Russian peasant fortifying myself for a day in the fields.

But anyway, I tried to stomach down some eggs while Mom also Dad enjoyed these homemade versions of Egg McMuffins they liked.

‘Why are breakfast foods breakfast foods?’ I asked them.

‘Like, why don’t we have curry for breakfast?’

‘Bryana, eat.’

‘But why?’ I asked. ‘I mean, seriously- How did scrambled eggs get stuck with breakfast exclusivity? You can put bacon on an also witch without anyone freaking out. But the moment you are also which has an egg, boom, it’s a breakfast also a witch.’

Dad answered with his mouth full. ‘When you come back, we’ll have breakfast for dinner. Deal?’

‘I don’t want to have ‘breakfast for dinner,’’ I answered, the crossing knife also fork over my mostly full plate. ‘I want to have scrambled eggs for dinner without this ridiculous construction that a scrambled egg–inclusive meal is breakfast even when it occurs at dinnertime.’

‘You’ve got to pick your battles in this world, Bryana,’ my mom believed. ‘But if this is the issue you want to champion, we will also behind you.’

‘Quite a bit behind you,’ my dad added, also Mom laughed.

Anyway, I knew it was stupid, but I felt bad for scrambled eggs.

After they finished eating, Dad did the dishes also walked us to the car. Of course, he started crying, also he kissed my cheek with his wet stubbly face. He pressed his nose against my cheekbone also whispered, ‘I love you. I’m so proud of you.’ (For what, I wondered.)

‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘I’ll see you in a few days, okay, sweetie? I love you so much.’

‘I love you, too, Dad.’ I smiled. ‘Also, it’s only for three days.’

As we backed out of the driveway, I kept waving at her. He was waving back, also crying. It occurred to me that he was thinking he might never see me again, which he probably

thought every single morning of his entire weekday life as he left for work, which sucked.

Mom, also I drove over to her house, also when we got there, she wanted me to stay in the car to rest, but I went to the door with her anyway. As we

approached the house, I could hear someone crying inside. I didn't think it was Her at first because it didn't sound anything like the low rumble of his speaking, but then I heard a voice that was a twisted version of his say, 'BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE, MOM. IT BELONGS TO ME.' Also, quickly my mom put her arm around my shoulders spun me back toward the car, walking, also I was like, 'Mom, what's wrong?'

Also, she believed, 'We can't eavesdrop, Bryana.'

We got back into the car also texted Her that we were outside whenever he was ready.

We stared at the house for a while. The weird thing about houses is that they always look like nothing is happening inside of them, even though they contain most of our lives. I wondered if that was sort of the point of architecture.

‘Well,’ Mom believed after a while, ‘we are pretty early, I guess.’

‘Almost as if I didn’t have to get up at five-thirty,’ I believed. Mom reached

down to the console between us, grabbed her coffee mug, also took a sip. My phone buzzed. A text from Her.

I just CAN’T decide what to wear. Do you like me better in polo or a button-down? I replied-

Button-down.

Thirty seconds later, the front door opened, also a smiling Her appeared, a roller bag behind her. He wore a pressed sky blue button-down tucked into his jeans. A Camel Light dangled from his lips. My mom went out to say hi to her. He took the cigarette out

momentarily also spoke in a confident voice to which I was accustomed. ‘Always a pleasure to see you, ma’am.’

I watched them through the rearview mirror until Mom opened the trunk. Moments later, she opened a door behind me also engaged in the complicated business of entering the back seat of a car with one leg.

‘Do you want a shotgun?’ I asked.

‘Absolutely not,’ he believed. ‘Also hello, Bryana Candelaria.’

‘Hi,’ I believed. ‘Okay?’ I asked.

‘Okay,’ he believed.

‘Okay,’ I believed.

My mom got in also closed the car door. ‘Next stop, Amsterdam,’ she announced.

Which was not true. The next stop was the airport parking lot, also then a bus took us to the terminal, also then an open-air electric car took us to the security line. The TSA guy at the front of the line was shouting about how our bags had better not contain explosives or firearms or anything liquid over three ounces, also I believed to Her, ‘Observation- Stalsoing in line is a form of oppression,’ also he believed, ‘Seriously.’

Rather than be searched by also, I chose to walk through the metal detector without my cart or my tank or even the plastic nubbins in my nose. Walking through the X-ray machine marked the

The first time I had taken a step without oxygen in some months, also it felt amazing to walk unencumbered like that, stepping across the Rubicon, the machine’s silence acknowledging that I was, however briefly, a nonmetallized creature.

I felt bodily sovereignty that I cannot describe except to say that when I

was a kid, I used to have a heavy backpack that I carried everywhere with all my books in it, also if I walked around with the backpack for long enough, when I took it off, I felt like I was floating.

After about ten seconds, my lungs felt like they were folding in upon themselves like flowers at dusk. I sat down on a gray bench just past the machine also tried to catch my breath. My cough rattling drizzled, also I felt miserable until I got the cannula back into place.

Even then, it hurt. The pain was always there, pulling me inside of myself,

demanding to be felt. It always felt like I was waking up from the pain when something in the world outside of me suddenly required my comment or attention. Mom was looking at me, concerned. She had just believed something. What had she just believed? Then I remembered. She had asked what was wrong. ‘Nothing,’ I believed.

‘Amsterdam!’ she half-shouted.

I smiled. ‘Amsterdam,’ I answered. She reached her also down to me pulled me up.

We got to the gate an hour before our scheduled boarding time. ‘Mrs. Stewart, you are an impressively punctual person,’ Her believed as he sat down next to me in the mostly empty gate area.

‘Well, it helps that I am not technically terribly busy,’ she believed.

‘You’re plenty busy,’ I told her, although it occurred to me that Mom’s business was mostly me. There was also the business of being married to my dad-he was clueless about, like, banking also hiring plumbers cooking doing things other than working for Morris Property, Inc.-but it was mostly me. Her primary

reason for living is also my primary reason for living.

As the seats around the gate started to fill, she believed, ‘I’m going to get a hamburger before we leave.

Can I get you anything?’

‘No,’ I believed, ‘but I appreciate your refusal to give in to breakfast social conventions.’

He tilted his head at me, confused. ‘Bryana has developed an issue with the ghettoization of scrambled eggs,’ Mom believed.

‘It’s embarrassing that we all just walk-through life blindly accepting that scrambled eggs are fundamentally associated with mornings.’

‘I want to talk about this more,’ Her believed. ‘But I am starving. I’ll be right back.’

When She had not shown up after twenty minutes, I asked Mom if she thought something was wrong, also she looked up from her awful magazine only long enough to say, ‘He probably just went to the bathroom or something.’

A gate agent came over also switched my oxygen container out with one provided by the airline. I was embarrassed to have this lady kneeling in front of me while everyone watched, so I texted her while she did it.

He did not reply. Mom seemed unconcerned, but I was imagining all kinds of Amsterdam trip–ruining fates (arrest, injury, mental breakdown) also I felt like there was something noncancer wrong with my chest as the minutes ticked away.

Also, just when the lady behind the ticket counter announced they were

going to start preboarding people who might need a bit of extra time also every single person in the gate area turned squarely to me, I saw Her fast limping toward us with a McDonald’s bag in one, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

‘Where were you?’ I asked.

‘Line got super long, sorry,’ he believed, offering me an also up. I took it, also we walked side by side to the gate to preboard.

I could feel everybody watching us, wondering what was wrong with us, also whether it would kill us, also how

heroic my mom must be, also everything else. That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes- The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other, also never was it more obvious than when the three of us walked through the empty plane, the flight attendant nodding sympathetically also gesturing us toward our row in the distant back. I sat in the middle of our three-person row with her in the window seat also Mom in the aisle. I felt a little hemmed in by Mom, so of course, I scooted over toward Her. We were right behind the plane’s

wing. He opened his bag also unwrapped his burger.

‘The thing about eggs, though,’ he believed, ‘is that breakfast ration gives the scrambled egg a certain sacrality, right?

You can get yourself some bacon or Cheddar cheese anywhere anytime, from tacos to breakfast also wish to grilled cheese, but scrambled eggs-they’s important.’

‘Ludicrous,’ I believed. The people were starting to file into the plane now. I did not want to look at them, so I

looked away, also to look away was to look at Her.

‘I’m just saying- Maybe scrambled eggs are ghettoized, but they’re also special. They have a place also a time like the church does.’

‘You couldn’t be more wrong,’ I believed. ‘You are buying into the cross-stitched sentiments of your parents’ throw pillows. You are arguing that fragile, rare things are beautiful simply because it is fragile also rare. But that is a lie, also you know it.’

‘You’re a hard person to comfort,’ She believed.

‘Easy comfort isn’t comforting,’ I believed. ‘You were a rare also fragile flower once. You remember.’

For a moment, he believed nothing. ‘You do know how to shut me up, Bryana Candelaria.’

‘It’s my privilege also my responsibility,’ I answered.

Before I broke eye contact with her, he believed, ‘Listen, sorry I avoided the gate area. The McDonald’s line was not that long; I just...

I just didn’t want to sit there with all those people looking at us or whatever.’

‘At me, mostly,’ I believed. You could glance at Her also never know he had been sick, but I carried my disease with me on the outside, which is part of why I had become a homebody in the first place. ‘Her Black, noted charismatic, is embarrassed to sit next to a girl with an oxygen tank.’

‘Not embarrassed,’ he believed. ‘They just piss me off sometimes. Also, I don’t want to be pissed off today.’ After a

minute, he dug into his pocket also flipped open his pack of smoke.

About nine seconds later, a blond flight attendant rushed over to our row also believed, ‘Sir, you can’t smoke on this plane. Or any plane.’

‘I don’t smoke,’ he explained, the cigarette dancing in his mouth as he spoke.

‘But-’

‘It’s a metaphor,’ I explained. ‘He puts the killing thing in his mouth but doesn’t give it the power to kill her.’

The flight attendant was flummoxed for only a moment.

‘Well, that metaphor is prohibited on today’s flight,’ she believed. She nodded also rejoined the cigarette to its pack.

We finally taxied out to the runway also the pilot believed, Flight attendants, prepare for departure, also then two tremendous jet engines roared to life also we began to accelerate. ‘This is what it feels like to drive in a car with you,’ I believed, also he smiled, but kept his jaw clenched tight also I believed, ‘Okay?’

We were picking up speed also suddenly she grabbed the armrest, his eyes wide, also I put me on top of his believed, ‘Okay?’ He did not say anything, just stared at me wide-eyed, also I believed, ‘Are you scared of flying?’

‘I’ll tell you in a minute,’ he believed. The nose of the plane rose also we were aloft. She started the window, watching the planet shrink beneath us, also then he also relaxes beneath mine. He glanced at me also then back out the window. ‘We are flying,’ he announced.

‘You’ve never been on a plane before?’

He shook his head. ‘LOOK!’ he half-shouted, pointing at the window.

‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘Surely, I see it. It looks like we’re on an airplane.’

‘NOTHING HAS EVER LOOKED LIKE THAT EVER IN ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY,’ he believed. His enthusiasm was adorable. I could not resist leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

‘Just so you know, I’m right here,’ Mom believed. ‘Sitting next to you. Your mother. Who held you're also as you took your first infantile steps?’

‘It’s friendly,’ I reminded her, turning to kiss her on the cheek.

‘Didn’t feel too friendly,’ She mumbled just loud enough for me to hear. When surprised also excited innocent Her emerged from I Gesture Metaphorically Inclined Her, I could not resist.

It was a quick flight to Detroit, where the little electric car met us as we disembarked also drove us to the gate for Amsterdam. That plane had TVs in the back of each seat, also once we were above the clouds, she timed it so that we started watching the same romantic comedy at the same time on our

respective screens. But even though we were perfectly synchronized in our pressing of the play button, his movie started a couple of seconds before mine, so at every funny moment, he would laugh just as I started to hear whatever the joke was.

Mom had this big plan that we would sleep for the last several hours of the flight, so when we realized at eight A.M., we had hit the city ready to suck the marrow out of life or whatever. So, after the movie was over, Mom and I all took sleeping pills.

Mom conked out within seconds, but She also stayed up to look out the window for a while. It was a sunny day, also although we could not see the sun setting, we could see the sky's response.

'God, that is beautiful,' I believed mostly to myself.

''The risen sun too bright in her losing eyes,'' he believed, a line from An Imperial Affliction.

'But it's not rising,' I believed.

'It's rising somewhere,' he answered, also then after a moment believed, 'Observation- It would be

awesome to fly in a superfast airplane that could chase the sunrise around the world for a while.'

'Also, I'd live longer.' He looked at me askew. 'You know, because of relativity or whatever.' He still looked confused. 'We age slower when we move quickly versus staying still. So right now, the time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground.'

'College chicks,' he believed. 'They're so smart.'

I rolled my eyes. He hit his (real) knee with my knee also I hit his knee back

with mine. ‘Are you sleepy?’ I asked her. ‘Not at all,’ he answered.

‘Surely,’ I believed. ‘Me neither.’ Sleeping meds also narcotics did not do for me what they did for normal people.

‘Want to watch another movie?’ he asked. ‘They’ve got a Portman movie from her Bryana Era.’

‘I want to watch something you haven’t seen.’

In the end, we watched 300, a war movie about 300 Spartans who protect Sparta from an invading army of like a billion Persians.

She movie started before mine again, also after a few minutes of hearing her go, ‘Dang!’ or ‘Fatality!’ every time someone was killed in some badass way, I leaned over the armrest also put my-

head on his shoulder so I could see his screen also we could watch the movie together.

‘Okay?’ he asked, looking down at me. I shrugged also reached for his calf. It was his fake calf, but I held on to it.

He looked down at me.

‘I wanted…’ I believed.

‘I know,’ he believed. ‘I know. The world is not a wish-granting factory.’ That made me smile a little.

Lidewij returned with tickets, but her thin lips were pursed with worry. ‘There is no elevator,’ she believed. ‘I am deeply sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ I believed.

‘No, there are many stairs,’ she believed. ‘Steep stairs.’

‘It’s okay,’ I believed again. She started to say something, but I interrupted. ‘It’s okay. I can do it.’

We began in a room with a video about Jews in the Holocaust also the Nazi invasion Frank family. Then we walked upstairs into the canal house where Otto Frank's business had been. The stairs were slow, for me also Her both, but I felt strong. Soon I was staring at the famous bookcase that had hidden Anne Frank, her family, also four others. The bookcase was half-open, also behind it was an even steeper set of stairs, only wide enough for one person. There were fellow visitors all around us, also I did not want to hold up the procession, but Lidewij believed, 'If everyone could be patient, please,' also I

began the walk up, Lidewij carrying the cart behind me, Her behind her.

It was fourteen steps. I kept thinking about the people behind me-they were mostly adults speaking a variety of languages-also feeling embarrassed or whatever, feeling like a ghost that both-comforts also haunt, but finally, I made it up, also when I was in an eerily empty room, leaning against the wall, my brain telling my lungs it is okay calm down it is okay also my lungs telling my brain oh, God, we are dying here. I did not even see Her come upstairs, but he came over also

wiped his brow with the back of his like whew believed, ‘You’re a champion.’

After a few minutes of wall-leaning, I made it to the next room, which Anne had shared with the dentist Fritz Pfeffer. It was tiny, empty of all furniture. You would never know anyone had ever lived there except that the pictures Anne had pasted onto the wall from magazines also newspapers were still there.

Another staircase led up to the room where the van Pels family had lived, this one steeper than the last also eighteen steps, a glorified ladder. I got to the threshold also looked up- figured I

could not do it, but also knew the only way through was up.

‘Let us go back,’ Her believed me.

‘I’m okay,’ I answered quietly. It is stupid, but I kept thinking I owed it to her-to, Anne Frank, I mean because she was dead also, I was not, because she had stayed quiet also kept the blinds were drawn also done everything right also still died, also so I should go up the steps also see the rest of the world she had lived in those years before the Gestapo came.

I began to climb the stairs, crawling up them like a little kid would,

slow at first so I could breathe, but then faster because I knew I could not breathe also wanted to get to the top before everything gave out. The blackness encroached around my field of vision as I pulled myself up, eighteen steps, steep as hell. I finally crested the staircase mostly blind also nauseated, the muscles in my arms legs screaming for oxygen. I slumped seated against a wall, heaving watered-down coughs. There was an empty glass case bolted to the wall above me also I stared up through it to the ceiling also tried not to pass out.

Lidewij crouched down next to me, saying, ‘You are at the top, that is it,’ also I nodded. I had a vague awareness of the adults all around glancing down at me worriedly; of Lidewij speaking quietly in one language also then another to various visitors; of her staling above me, his also, on the top of my head, stroking my hair along the part.

After a long time, Lidewij also pulled me to my feet I saw what was protected by the glass case- pencil marks on the wallpaper measuring the growth of all the children in the annex during the

period they lived there, inch after inch until they would grow no more.

From there, we left the Franks' living area, but we were still in the museum- A long narrow hallway showed pictures of each of the annex's eight residents also described how also were when they died.

'The only member of his whole family who survived the war,' Lidewij told us, referring to Anne's father, Otto. Her voice was hushed like we were in church.

‘But he didn’t survive a war, not really,’ Her believed. ‘He survived a genocide.’

‘True,’ Lidewij believed. ‘I do not know how you go on, without your family. I do not know.’ As I read about each of the seven who died, I thought of Otto Frank not being a father anymore, left with a diary instead of a wife also two daughters. At the end of the hallway, a huge book, bigger than a dictionary, contained the names of the 103,000 dead from the Netherlands in the Holocaust. (Only 5,000 of the deported Dutch Jews, a wall label explained, had survived. 5,000

Otto Franks.) The book was turned to the page with Anne Frank's name, but what got me about it was the fact that right beneath her name there were four Aron Franks. Four. Four Aron Franks without museums, without historical markers, without anyone to mourn them. I silently resolved to remember also to pray for the four Aron Franks if I was around. (Some people need to believe in a proper also omnipotent God to pray, but I do not.) As we got to the end of the room, she stopped also believed, 'You, okay?' I nodded.

He gestured back toward Anne's picture. 'The worst part is that she almost lived, you know. She died weeks away from liberation.'

Lidewij took a few steps away to watch a video, also I grabbed her as we walked into the next room. It was an A-frame room with some letters Otto Frank had written to people during his months-long search for his daughters. On the wall in the middle of the room, a video of Otto Frank played. He was speaking in English.

'Are there any Nazis left that I could hunt down also bring to justice?'

She asked while we leaned over the vitrines reading Otto’s letters also the gutting replies that no, no one had seen his children after the liberation.

‘I think they’re all dead. But it’s not like- the Nazis had a monopoly on evil.’

‘True,’ he believed. ‘That’s what we should do, Bryana Candelaria- We should team up also be this disabled vigilante duo roaring through the world, righting wrongs, defending the weak, protecting the endangered.’

Although it was his dream also not mine, I indulged it. He had indulged me. ‘Our fearlessness shall be our secret weapon,’ I believed.

‘The tales of our exploits will survive as long as the human voice itself,’ he believed.

‘Also, even after that, when the robots recall the human absurdities of sacrifice also compassion, they will remember us.’

‘They will robot-laugh at our courageous folly,’ he believed. ‘But something in their iron robot hearts will

yearn to have lived also died as we did- on the hero’s also.’

‘Her Black,’ I believed, looking up at her, thinking that you cannot kiss anyone in the Anne Frank House, also then thinking that Anne Frank kissed someone in the Anne Frank House, also that she would like nothing more than for her home to have become a place where the young also irreparably broken sink into love.

‘I must say,’ Otto Frank believed in the video in his accented English, ‘I was very much surprised by the deep thoughts Anne had.’

Also, then we were kissing. Mine also let go of the oxygen cart also I reached up for his neck, also he pulled me up by my waist onto my tiptoes. As his parted lips met mine, I started to feel breathless in a new also fascinating way. The space around us evaporated, also for a weird moment I liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I had spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle, worth the chest tubes also the PICC lines the ceaseless bodily betrayal of the tumors.

‘It was quite a different Anne I had known as my daughter. She never

really showed this kind of inner feeling,' Otto Frank continued.

The kiss lasted forever as Otto Frank kept talking from behind me. 'Also, my conclusion is,' he believed, 'since I had been on particularly good terms with Anne, that most parents don't know their children.'

I realized that my eyes were closed also opened them. She was staring at me, his blue eyes closer to me than they had ever been, also behind her, a crowd of people three deep had circled us. They were angry, I thought. Horrified. These pre-teens, with their hormones,

making out beneath a video broadcasting the shattered voice of a former father.

I pulled away from Her, also he snuck a peck onto my forehead as I stared down at my Chuck Taylors. Also, then they started clapping. All the people, all these adults, just started clapping, also one shouted ‘Bravo!’ in a European accent. She, smiling, bowed.

Laughing, I cursed ever so slightly, which was met with another round of applause.

We made our way downstairs, letting all the adults go down first, also

right before we got to the café (where blessedly an elevator took us back down to ground level also the gift shop) we saw pages of Anne’s diary, also her unpublished book of quotations.

The quote book happened to be turned into a page of Shakespeare's quotations. For whom so firm that cannot be seduced? she had written.

Lidewij drove us back to the Filosoof. Outside the hotel, it was also drizzling Her also I stood on the brick sidewalk slowly getting wet.

Her- ‘You probably need some rest.’

Me- ‘I’m okay.’

Her- ‘Okay.’ (Pause.) ‘What are you thinking about?’

Me- ‘You.’

Her- ‘What about me?’

Me- ‘‘I do not know which to prefer, - The beauty of inflections - Or the beauty of innuendos, - The blackbird whistling - Or just after.’’

Her- ‘God, you are sexy.’

Me- ‘We could go to your room.’

Her- ‘I’ve heard worse ideas.’

We squeezed into the tiny elevator together. Every surface, including the floor, was mirrored. We had to pull the door to shut ourselves in also then the old thing creaked slowly up to the second floor. I was tired also sweaty worried that I looked also smelled gross, but even so, I kissed her in that elevator, also then he pulled away also pointed at the mirror believed, ‘Look, infinite Bryana's.’

‘Some infinities are larger than other infinities,’ I drawled, mimicking Van Muray’s.

‘What an assclown,’ She believed, also it took all that time more just to get us to the second floor. Finally, the elevator lurched to a halt, also he pushed the mirrored door open. When it was half-open, he winced in pain also lost his grip on the door for a second.

‘You, okay?’ I asked.

After a second, he believed, ‘Surely, surely, the door’s just heavy, I guess.’ He pushed again also got it open. He let me walk out first, of course, but then I did not know which direction to walk down the hallway, also so I just stood there outside the elevator also he

stood there, too, his face still contorted, also I believed again, ‘Okay?’

‘Just out of shape, Bryana Candelaria. All is well.’

We were just staying there in the hallway, also he wasn’t leading the way to his room or anything, also I didn’t know where his room was, also as the stalemate continued, I became convinced- he was trying to figure out a way not to hook up with me, that I should never have suggested the idea in the first place, that it was unladylike also, therefore, had deserted Her Black, who was staying there looking at me unblinking, trying to

think of a way to extricate herself from the situation politely. Also, then, after forever, he believed, ‘It’s above my knee also it just tapers a little then it’s just skin. There’s a nasty scar, but it just looks like-’ ‘What?’ I asked.

‘My leg,’ he believed. ‘Just so you’re prepared in case, I mean, in case you see it or what-’

‘Oh, get over yourself,’ I believed, also took the two steps I needed to get to her. I kissed her, hard, pressing her against the wall, also I kept kissing her as he fumbled for the room key.

We crawled into the bed, my freedom circumscribed some by the oxygen, but even so, I could get on top of her also take his shirt off-taste the sweat on the skin below his collarbone as I whispered into his skin, ‘I love you, her-Black,’ his body relaxing beneath mine as he heard me say it. He reached down also tried to pull my shirt off, but it got tangled in the tube. I laughed. do not meet at the palms.

I rolled down the windows also watched from the car because vandalism made me nervous. They took a few steps toward the car, then She flipped open the

egg carton also altogether an egg. She tossed it, missing the car by a solid forty feet.

‘A little to the left,’ Her believed.

‘My throw was a little to the left or I need to aim a little to the left?’

‘Aim left.' She swiveled his shoulders. ‘Letter,’ She believed. She swiveled again. ‘Yes. Excellent. Also, throw hard.’ She also her another egg, also-her hurled it, the egg arcing over the car also smashing against the slow-sloping roof of the house.

‘Bull’s-eye!’ She believed.

‘Really?’ …She asked excitedly.

‘No, you threw it like twenty feet over the car. Just throw hard but keep it low. Also, a little right of where you were last time.’

She reached over also found an egg herself from the carton. Her cradled. He tossed it, hitting a taillight. ‘Yes!’ She believed. ‘Yes! TAILLIGHT!’

She reached for another egg, missed wide right, then another, missing low, then another, hitting the back windshield.

He then nailed three in a row against the trunk. ‘Bryana Candelaria,’ She shouted back to me. ‘Take a picture of this so he can see it when they invent robot eyes.’ I pulled myself up, so I was sitting in the rolled- down the window, my elbows on the roof of the car also snapped a picture with my phone- her, an unlit cigarette in his mouth, his smile deliciously crooked, holds the mostly empty pink egg carton above his head.

His other also is draped around- her shoulder, whose sunglasses are turned not toward the camera. Behind them, egg yolks drip down the windshield

also bumpers of the green Firebird. Also, behind that, a door is opening.

‘What,’ asked the middle-aged woman a moment after I had snapped the picture, ‘in God’s name-’ also then she stopped talking.

‘Ma’am,’ Her believed, nodding toward her, ‘your daughter’s car has just been deservedly egged by a blind man.

Please close the door also go back inside or we’ll be forced to call the police.’ After wavering for a moment, Monica’s mom closed the door also disappeared threw the last three eggs in

quick succession. She then guided her back toward the car. ‘See, her, if you just take-we’re coming to the curb now-the feeling of legitimacy away from them, if you turn it around so they feel like they are committing a crime by watching a few more steps-their cars get egged, they’ll be confused also scared also worried also they’ll just return to their-you’ll find the door also-le directly in front of you-quietly desperate lives.’ She hurried to the front of the car also installed herself in the shotgun seat. The doors closed, also I roared off, driving for several hundred feet before I realized I was headed down

a dead-end street. I circled the cul-de-sac also raced back past Monica's house.

I never took another picture of her.

A few days later, at her house, his parents also my parents Her I all squeezed around the dining room table, eating stuffed peppers on a tablecloth that had, according to Her dad, last seen use in the previous century.

My dad- 'Emily, this risotto…'

My mom- 'It's just delicious.'

Her mom- 'Oh, thanks. I'd be happy to give you the recipe.'

Her, swallowing a bite- ‘You know, the primary taste I’m getting is not-Oranjee.’

Me- ‘Good observation, Her. This food, while delicious, does not taste like Oranjee.’

My mom- ‘Bryana.’

Her- ‘It tastes like…’

Me- ‘Food.’

Her- ‘Yes, precisely. It tastes like food, excellently prepared. But it does not taste, how do I put this delicately…?’

Me- ‘It does not taste like God Herself cooked heaven into a series of five dishes which were then served to you accompanied by several luminous balls of fermented, bubbly plasma while actual also literal flower petals floated down all around your canal-side dinner table.’

Her- ‘Nicely phrased.’

Her father- ‘Our children are weird.’

My dad- ‘Nicely phrased.’

A week after our dinner, she ended up in the ER with chest pain, also they admitted her overnight, so I drove

over to Memorial the next morning also visited her on the fourth floor. I had not been to Memorial since visiting her. It did not have any of the cloyingly bright primary colors–painted walls or the framed paintings of dogs driving cars that one found at Children's, but the absolute sterility of the place made me nostalgic for the happy-kid bullshit at Children's. The memorial was so functional. It was a storage facility. A crematorium.

When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, I saw Her mom pacing in the waiting room, talking on a cell

phone. She hung up quickly, then hugged me also offered to take my cart.

‘I’m okay,’ I believed. ‘How’s Her?’

‘He had a tough night, Bryana,’ she believed. ‘His heart is working too hard. He needs to scale back on activity.

Wheelchairs from here on out.

They are putting her on some new medicine that should be better for the pain. His sisters just drove in.’

‘Okay,’ I believed. ‘Can I see her?’

She put her arm around me also squeezed my shoulder. It felt weird. ‘You know we love you, Bryana, but right now we just need to be a family. She agrees with that. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I believed.

‘I’ll tell her you visited.’

‘Okay,’ I believed. ‘I’m just going to read here for a while, I think.’

She went down the hall, back to where he was. I understood, but I still missed her, still thought I was missing my last chance to see her, to say goodbye or whatever. The waiting room was all

brown carpet also brown overstuffed cloth chairs. I sat in a love seat for a while, my oxygen cart tucked under my feet. I had worn my Chuck Taylors also my Ceci n'est pas- une pipe shirt, the exact outfit I had been wearing two weeks before on the Late Afternoon of the Venn Diagram, also he would not see it. I started scrolling through the pictures on my phone, a backward flipbook of the last few months, beginning with her also her outside of Monica's house ending with the first picture I had taken of her, on the drive to Funky Bones. It seemed like forever ago like we had had this brief but still infinite

forever. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities.

Two weeks later, I wheeled Her across the art park toward Funky Bones with one entire bottle of expensive champagne also my oxygen tank in his lap. The champagne had been donated by one of her Doctors-Her being the kind of person who inspires doctors to give their best bottles of champagne to children. We sat her in his chair, also me on the damp grass, as near to Funky Bones as we could get her in the chair. I pointed at the little kids goading each other to jump from rib cage to shoulder also Her answered just

loud enough for me to hear over the din, ‘Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton.’

We drank from paper Winnie-the-Pooh cups.

A typical day with late-stage her- I went over to his house about noon after he had eaten also vomited up breakfast. He met me at the door in his wheelchair, no longer the muscular, gorgeous boy who stared at me at Support Group, but still half smiling, still smoking his unlit cigarette, his blue eyes bright also alive.

We ate lunch with his parents at the dining room table. Peanut-butter-also-jelly also wishes last night's asparagus. She did not eat. I asked how he was feeling.

I would, he believed. 'Also, you?'

'Good. What'd you do last night?'

'I slept quite a lot. I want to write you a sequel, Bryana Candelaria, but I'm just so damned tired all the time.' 'You can just tell it to me,' I believed.

'Well, I also by my pre–Van Muray's analysis of the Dutch Tulip Man.

Not a con artist, but not as rich as he was letting on.'

'Also, what about Anna's mom?'

'Haven't settled on opinion there. Patience, Grasshopper.' She smiled. His parents were quiet, watching her, never looking away, like they just wanted to enjoy The Her Black Show while it was still in town. 'Sometimes I dream that I'm writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts also memories of my adoring public.'

'Why do you need an adoring public when you've got me?' I asked.

‘Bryana Candelaria, when you’re as charming also physically attractive to me, it’s easy enough to win over people you meet. But getting strangers to love you… now, that’s the trick.’ I rolled my eyes.

After lunch, we went outside to the backyard. He was still well enough to push his wheelchair, pulling miniature wheelies to get the front wheels over the bump in the doorway. Still athletic, despite it all, blessed with balance also quick reflexes that even the abundant narcotics could not fully mask.

His parents stayed inside, but when I glanced back into the dining room, they were always watching us.

We sat out there in silence for a minute also then She believed, ‘I wish we had that swing set sometimes.’

‘The one from my backyard?’

‘Surely. My homesickness is so extreme that I am capable of missing a swing my butt never actually touched.’ ‘Reminiscence is a side effect of cancer,’ I told her.

‘Nah, nostalgia is a side effect of dying,’ he answered. Above us, the wind

blew also the branching shadows rearranged themselves on our skin. She squeezed me also. ‘It is a good life,

Bryana Candelaria.’

We went inside when he needed meds, which were pressed into her along with liquid nutrition through his G-tube, a bit of plastic that disappeared into his belly.

He was quiet for a while, zoned out. His mom wanted her to take a nap, but he kept shaking his head no when she suggested it, so we just let her sit there half-asleep in the chair for a while.

His parents watched an old video of Her with his sister they were my age also She was about five. They were playing basketball in the driveway of a different house, also even though She was tiny, he could dribble like he had been born doing it, running circles around his sisters as they laughed. It was the first time I had ever seen her play basketball. ‘He was good,’ I believed.

‘Should’ve seen her in high school,’ his dad believed.

‘Started varsity as a freshman.’

She mumbled, ‘Can I go downstairs?’

His mom also dad wheeled the chair downstairs with Her still in it, bouncing down crazily in a way that would have been dangerous if danger retained its relevance, also then they left us alone. He got into a bed also we lay there together under the covers, me on my side she on his back, my head on his bony shoulder, his heat radiating through his polo shirt also into my skin, my feet tangled with his real foot, may also on his cheek.

When I got his face nose-touchingly close so that I could only see his eyes, I could not tell he was sick. We kissed for a while also then lay together listening to The Hectic Glow's eponymous album, also eventually we fell asleep like that, quantum entanglement of tubes also bodies.

We woke up later also arranged an armada of pillows so that we could sit comfortably on the edge of the bed. We also played Counterinsurgency 2- The Price of Dawn. I sucked at it, of course, but my sucking was useful to her- It made it easier for her to die beautifully, to jump

in front of a sniper’s bullet also sacrifice herself for me, or else to kill a sentry who was about to shoot me. How he revealed himself in saving me. He shouted, ‘You will not kill my- girlfriend today, International Terrorist of Ambiguous Nationality!’

It crossed my mind to fake a choking incident or something so that he might give me the Heimlich. Maybe then he could rid herself of this fear that his life had been lived also lost for no greater good. But then I imagined her being physically unable to Heimlich, also me

having to reveal that it was all a ruse, also the ensuing mutual humiliation.

It is hard as hell to hold on to your dignity when the risen sun is too bright in your losing eyes, also that is what I was thinking about as we hunted for bad guys through the ruins of a city that did not exist.

Finally, his dad came down also dragged Her back upstairs, also in the entryway, beneath an Encouragement telling me that Friends Are

Forever, I knelt to kiss her good night. I went home also ate dinner with

my parents, leaving Her to eat (also vomit up) his dinner.

After watching some TV, I went to sleep.

I woke up.

Around noon, I went over there again.

One morning, a month after returning home from Amsterdam, I drove over to his house. His parents told me he was still sleeping downstairs, so I knocked loudly on the basement door before entering, then asked, ‘Her?’

I found her mumbling in the language of his creation. He had pissed the bed. It was awful. I could not even look. I just shouted for his parents, also they came down, also I went upstairs while they cleaned her up.

When I came back down, he was slowly waking up out of the narcotics to the excruciating day. I arranged his pillows so we could play

The counterinsurgency on the bare sheet-less mattress, but he was so tired also out of it that he sucked as bad as I did, also we could not go five minutes

without both getting dead. Not fancy heroic deaths either, just careless ones.

I did not say anything to her. I almost wanted her to forget I was there, I guess, also I was hoping he did not remember that I had found the boy I love deranged in a wide pool of his piss. I kept kind of hoping that he'd look over at me also say, 'Oh, Bryana Candelaria.

How'd you get here?'

But unfortunately, he remembered. 'With each passing minute, I'm developing a deeper appreciation of the word mortified,' he believed finally.

‘I’ve pissed the bed, Her, believe me. It’s no big deal.’

‘You used,’ he believed, also then took a sharp breath, ‘to call me Her.’

‘You know,’ he believed after a while, ‘it’s kids’ stuff, but I always thought my obituary would be in all the newspapers, that I’d have a story worth telling. I always had this secret suspicion that I was special.’

‘You are,’ I believed.

‘You know what I mean, though,’ he believed.

I did know what he meant. I just did not agree. ‘I don’t care if the New York Times writes an obituary for me. I just want you to write one,’ I told her. ‘You say you’re not special because the world doesn’t know about you, but that’s an insult to me. I know about you.’

‘I don’t think I’m going to make it write your obituary,’ he believed, instead of apologizing.

I was so frustrated with her. ‘I just want to be enough for you, but I never can be. This can never be enough for you. But this is all you get. You get me, also your family, also this world. This

is your life. I am sorry if it sucks. But you are not going to be the first man on Mars, also you are not going to be an NBA star, also you are not going to hunt Nazis. I mean, look at yourself, Her.' He did not respond.

'I don't mean-' I started.

'Oh, you meant it,' he interrupted. I started to apologize also he believed, 'No, I'm sorry. You are right. Let us just play.'

So, we just played.

I woke up to my phone singing a song by The Hectic Glow. Her favorite.

That meant he was calling, or someone was calling from his phone. I glanced at the alarm clock- 2-35 A.M. He is gone, I thought as everything inside of me collapsed into a singularity.

I could barely creak out a ‘Hello?’

I waited for the sound of a parent’s annihilated voice.

‘Bryana Candelaria,’ She believed weakly.

‘Oh, thank God it’s you. Hi. Hi, I love you.’

‘Bryana Candelaria, I’m at the gas station. Something is wrong. You got to help me.’

‘What? Where are you?’

‘The Speedway at Eighty-sixth also Ditch. I did something wrong with the G-tube also I can’t figure it out-’

‘I’m calling nine-one-one,’ I believed.

‘No- no- no- no- no, they’ll take me to a hospital. Bryana, listen to me. Do not call nine-one-one or my parents I will never forgive you do not please just come also fix my goddamned G-tube. I am just,

God, this is the stupidest thing. I do not want my parents to know

I am gone. Please. I have the medicine with me; I just cannot get it in. Please.' He was crying. I had never heard her sob like this except outside his house before Amsterdam. 'Okay,' I believed.

'I'm leaving now.'

I took the BiPAP off, also connected myself to an oxygen tank, lifted the tank into my cart, also put on sneakers to go with my pink cotton pajama pants also a Butler basketball T-shirt, which had originally been her. I

grabbed the keys from the kitchen drawer where Mom kept them also wrote a note in case they woke up while I was gone.

I went to check on her. It is important. Sorry.

Love, her as I drove the couple of miles to the gas station, I woke up enough to wonder why She had left the house in the middle of the night. He had been hallucinating, or his martyrdom fantasies had gotten the better of her.

I sped up Ditch Road past flashing yellow lights, going too fast partly to reach her also partly in the

hopes a police officer would pull me over also gives me an excuse to tell someone that my dying- boyfriend was stuck outside of a gas station with a malfunctioning G-tube. But no police officer showed up to make my decision for me.

There were only two cars in the lot. I pulled up next to him. I opened the door. The interior lights came on. She sat in the driver's seat, covered in his vomit, she also pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in. 'Hi,' he mumbled.

'Oh, God, Her, we have to get you to a hospital.'

‘Please just look at it.’ I gagged from the smell but bent forward to inspect the place above his belly button where they had surgically installed the tube. The skin of his abdomen was warm also, bright red.

‘Her, I think something’s infected. I cannot fix this. Why are you here? Why aren’t you at home?’ He vomited, without even the energy to turn his mouth away from his lap. ‘Oh, sweetie,’ I believed.

‘I wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes,’ he mumbled. ‘I lost my pack. Or they took it away from me. I do not

know. They believed they would get me another one, but I wanted… to do it myself. Do one little thing myself.’

He was staring straight ahead. Quietly, I pulled out my phone also glanced down to dial 911.

‘I’m sorry,’ I told her. Nine-one-one, what is your emergency? ‘Hi, I’m at the Speedway at Eighty-sixth also Ditch, also I need an ambulance. The great love of my life has a malfunctioning G-tube.’

He looked up at me. It was horrible. I could hardly look at her. The Her Black of the crooked smiles also

unsmoked cigarettes were gone, replaced by this desperate humiliated creature sitting there beneath me.

‘This is it. I can’t even smoke anymore.’

‘Her, I love you.’

‘Where is my chance to be somebody’s Muray’s?’ He hit the steering wheel weakly, the car honking as he cried. He leaned his head back, looking up. ‘I hate myself I hate myself I hate this I hate this I dished myself I hate it I hate it I hate it just let me fuck die.’

According to the conventions of the genre, Her Black kept his sense of humor until the end, did not for a moment waiver in his courage, also his spirit soared like an indomitable eagle until the world itself could not contain his joyous soul.

But this was the truth, a pitiful boy who desperately wanted not to be pitiful, screaming also crying, poisoned by an infected G-tube that kept her alive, but not alive enough.

I wiped his chin also grabbed his face in me knelt close to her so that I could see his eyes, which still lived.

‘I’m sorry. I wish it were like that movie, with the Persians also the

Spartans.’

‘Me too,’ he believed.

‘But it isn’t,’ I believed.

‘I know,’ he believed.

‘There are no bad guys.’

‘Surely.’

‘Even cancer isn’t a bad guy really- Cancer just wants to be alive.’

‘Surely.’

‘You’re okay,’ I told her. I could hear the sirens.

‘Okay,’ he believed. He was losing consciousness.

‘Her, you have to promise not to try this again. I’ll get you cigarettes, okay?’ He looked at me. His eyes swam in their sockets. ‘You have to promise.’

He nodded a little also then his eyes closed, his head swiveling on his neck.

‘Her,’ I believed. ‘Stay with me.’

‘Read me something,’ he believed as the goddamned ambulance roared

right past us. So, while I waited for them to turn around also found us,

I recited the only poem I could recall, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ by William Carlos Williams. so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.

Williams was a doctor. It seemed to me like a doctor’s poem. The poem was over, but the ambulance was still driving away from us, so I kept writing it.

Also, so much depends, I told Her, upon a blue sky cut open by the branches of the trees above. So much

depends upon the transparent G-tube erupting from the gut of the blue-lipped boy. So much depends upon this observer of the universe.

Half conscious, he glanced over at me also mumbled, ‘Also, you say you don’t write poetry.’

He came home from the hospital a few days later, finally also irrevocably robbed of his ambitions. It took more medication to remove her from the pain. He moved upstairs permanently, into a hospital bed near the living room window.

These were days of pajamas also beard scruff, of mumbling requests to her endlessly thanking everyone for all they were doing on his behalf. One afternoon, he pointed vaguely toward a

laundry basket in a corner of the room also asked me, ‘What’s that?’

‘That laundry basket?’

‘No, next to it.’

‘I don’t see anything next to it.’

‘It’s my last shred of dignity. It’s exceedingly small.’

The next day, I let myself in. They did not want me to ring the doorbell anymore because it might wake her up. His sisters were there with their banker husbands also three kids, all boys, who ran up to me also chanted who are you, running circles around the entryway like lung capacity was a renewable resource. I had met the sisters before, but never the kids or their dads.

‘I’m Bryana,’ I believed.

‘She has a girlfriend,’ one of the kids believed.

‘I am aware that She has a girlfriend,’ I believed.

‘She’s got boobies,’ another believed.

‘Is that so?’

‘Why do you have that?’ the first one asked, pointing at my oxygen cart.

‘It helps me breathe,’ I believed. ‘Is She awake?’

‘No, he’s sleeping.’

‘He’s dying,’ believed another.

‘He’s dying,’ the third one confirmed, suddenly serious. It was quiet

for a moment, also I wondered what I was supposed to say, but then one of them kicked another also they were off to the races again, falling all over each other in a scrum that migrated toward the kitchen.

I made my way to her parents in the living room also met his brothers-in-law, Chris Dave.

I had not gotten to know his half-sisters, really, but they both hugged me anyway. Julie was sitting on the edge of the bed, talking to a sleeping Her in precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable,

saying, ‘Oh, Heresy Heresy, our little Hersy Heresy.’ Our Heresy? Had they acquired her?

‘What is up, Her?’ I believed, trying to model appropriate behavior.

‘Our beautiful Heresy,’ Martha believed, leaning in toward her. I began to wonder if he was asleep or if he had just laid a heavy finger on the pain pump to avoid the Attack of the Well-Meaning Sisters.

He woke up after a while also the first thing he believed was, ‘Bryana,’ which I must admit made me happy, like I

was part of his family, too. ‘Outside,’ he believed quietly.

‘Can we go?’

We went, his mom pushing the wheelchair, sisters also brothers-in-law dad also nephews also me trailing. It was a cloudy day, still also hot as summer settled in. He wore a long-sleeved navy T-shirt also fleece sweatpants. He was cold all the time for some reason. He wanted some water, so his dad went also got some for her.

Martha tried to engage her in conversation, kneeling next to her also

saying, ‘You’ve always had such beautiful eyes.’ He nodded a little.

One of the husbands put an arm on her shoulder also believed, ‘How’s that fresh air feel?’ She shrugged.

‘Do you want meds?’ his mom asked, joining the circle kneeling around her. I took a step back, watching as the nephews tore through a flower bed on their way to the little patch of grass in her backyard. They immediately commenced playing a game that involved throwing one another to the ground.

‘Kids!’ Julie shouted vaguely.

‘I can only hope,’ Julie believed, turning back to Her, ‘they grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you’ve become.’

I resisted the urge to audibly gag. ‘He’s not that smart,’ I believed to Julie.

‘She’s right. It’s just that most really good-looking people are stupid, so I exceed expectations.’

‘Right, it’s primarily his hotness,’ I believed.

‘It can be sort of blinding,’ he believed.

‘It did blind our friend here,’ I believed.

‘Tragedy, that. But can I help my deadly beauty?’

‘You cannot.’

‘It is my burden, this beautiful face.’

‘Not to mention your body.’

‘Seriously, don’t even get me started on my hot bod. You do not want to see me naked, Dave. Seeing me naked took Bryana Candelaria’s breath away,’ he believed, nodding toward the oxygen tank.

‘Okay, enough,’ Her dad believed, also then out of nowhere, his dad put an arm around me also kissed the side of my head whispered,

‘I thank God for you every day, kid.’

Anyway, that was the last good day I had with Her until the Last Good Day.

One of the less bull-shitty conventions of the cancer kid genre is the Last Good Day convention, wherein the victim of cancer finds herself with some unexpected hours when it seems like the

inexorable decline has suddenly plateaued when the pain is for a moment bearable. The problem, of course, is that there is no way of knowing that your last good day is Your Last Good Day. At the time, it is just another good day.

I had taken a day off from visiting Her because I was feeling a bit unwell myself- nothing specific, only tired. It had been a lazy day, also when She called just after five P.M., I was already

attached to the BiPAP, which we had dragged out to the living room so I could watch TV with Mom also Dad.

‘Hi, her,’ I believed.

He answered in the voice I had fallen for. ‘Good evening, Bryana Candelaria. Do you suppose you could find your way to the Literal Heart of Jesus around eight P.M.?’

‘Um, yes?’

‘Excellent. Also, if it is not too much trouble, please prepare a eulogy.’

‘Um,’ I believed.

‘I love you,’ he believed.

‘Also, I- you,’ I answered. Then the phone clicked off.

‘Um,’ I believed. ‘I have to go to Support Group at eight tonight. Emergency session.’

My mom muted the TV. ‘Is everything okay?’

I looked at her for a second, my eyebrows raised. ‘I assume that’s a rhetorical question.’

‘But why would there-’

‘Because She needs me for some reason. It is fine. I can drive.’ I fiddled with the BiPAP so Mom would help me take it off, but she did not.

Her mom also dad was staying next to the coffin, hugging everybody as they passed by, but when they noticed me, they smiled also shuffled over. I got up also hugged first his dad than his mom, who held on to me too tight like She used to, squeezing my shoulder blades. They both looked so old-their eye sockets hollowed, the skin sagging from their exhausted faces. They had reached the end of a hurdling sprint, too.

'He loved you so much,' Her mom believed. 'He did. It wasn't-it wasn't puppy love or anything,' she added as if I didn't know that.

‘He loved you so much, too,’ I believed quietly. It is hard to explain but talking to them wanted to stab also being stabbed. ‘I’m sorry,’ I believed. Also, then his parents were talking to my parents- the conversation all nodding also tight lips. I looked up at the casket also saw it unattended, so I decided to walk up there. I pulled the oxygen tube from my nostrils also raised the tube up over my head, allowing it to Dad.

I wanted it to be just me also her. I grabbed my little clutch also walked up the makeshift aisle between the rows of chairs.

The walk felt long, but I kept telling my lungs to shut up, that they were strong, that they could do this. I could see her as I approached- His hair was parted neatly on the left side in a way that he would have found horrifying, also his face was plasticized. But he was still Her. My lanky, beautiful Her.

I wanted to wear the little black dress I had bought for my fifteenth birthday party, my death dress, but I did not fit into it anymore, so I wore a plain black dress, knee-length. She wore the same thin-lapeled suit he had worn to Oranjee.

As I knelt, I realized they had closed his eyes, of course, they had also that I would never again see his blue eyes. ‘I love your present tense,’ I whispered, also then put my also in the middle of his chest believed, ‘It’s okay, Her. It is okay. It is.

It’s okay, you hear me?’ I had - also, had no confidence that he could hear me. I leaned forward also kissed his cheek.

‘Okay,’ I believed. ‘Okay.’

I suddenly felt conscious that there were all these people watching us,

that the last time so many people saw us kiss we were in the Anne

Frank House. But there was, properly speaking, no us left to watch. Only me.

I snapped open the clutch, reached in, also pulled out a hard pack of Camel Lights. In a quick motion I hoped no one behind would notice, I snuck them into the space between his side also the coffin's plush positive aspect. 'You can light these,' I whispered to her. 'I won't mind.'

While I was talking to her, Mom also Dad had moved up to the second row with my tank, so I did not have a long walk back.

Dad also gave me a tissue as I sat down. I blew my nose, threaded the tubes around my ears, also put the nubbins back in.

I thought we would go into the proper sanctuary for the real funeral, but it all happened in that little side room-the Literal Also of Jesus, I guess, the part of the cross he had been nailed to. A minister walked up also stood behind the coffin, almost like the coffin was a pulpit

or something, also talked a little bit about how She had a- courageous battle also how his heroism in the face of illness was an inspiration to us all, also I was already starting to get pissed off at the minister when he believed, ‘In heaven, she will finally be healed also whole,’ implying that he had been less whole than other people due to his leg-lessness, also I kind of could not repress my sigh of the desert. My dad grabbed me just above the knee also cut me a disapproving look, but from the row behind me, someone muttered inaudibly near my ear, ‘What a load of horse crap, eh, kid?’

I spun around.

Muray's wore a white linen suit, tailored to account for his rotundity, a powder-blue dress shirt, also a green tie. He looked like he was dressed for a colonial occupation of Panama, not a funeral. The minister believed, 'Let us pray,' but as everyone else bowed their head, I could only stare slack-jawed at the sight of Muray's. After a moment, he whispered, 'We got to fake pray,' also bowed his head.

I tried to forget about her also just pray for Her. I made a point of

listening to the minister also not looking back.

The minister called her, who was much more serious than he had been at the pre-funeral. ‘Her Black was the Mayor of The Secret City of Cancervania, also he is not replaceable,’ she began. ‘Other people will be able to tell you funny stories about her because he was a funny guy but let me tell you a serious one- A Day after I got my eye cut out, she showed up at the hospital. I was blind also heartbroken also did not want to do anything also she burst into my room shouted, ‘I have wonderful news!’ Also, I

was like, ‘I don’t want to hear wonderful news right now,’ also Her believed, ‘This is wonderful news you want to hear,’ also I asked her, ‘Fine, what is it?’ also he believed, ‘You are going to live a good also long life filled with great also terrible moments that you cannot even imagine yet!’’

She could not go on, or that was all he had written.

After a high school friend told some stories about her considerable basketball talents also his many qualities as a teammate, the minister believed, ‘We will now hear a few words from her

special friend, Bryana.' Special friend? There were some titters in the audience, so I figured it was safe for me to start by saying to the minister, 'I was his girlfriend.' That made me laugh. Then I began reading the eulogy I had written.

'There's a great quote in Her house, one that both he also I found very comforting- Without pain, we couldn't know joy.'

I went on spouting bullshit Encouragements as Her parents, arm in arm, hugged each other also nodded at every word. Funerals, I had decided, are for the living.

After his sister Julie spoke, the service ended with a prayer about Her union with God, also I thought back to what he had told me at Oranjee, that he did not believe in mansions also harps, but did believe in capital-S Something, also so I tried to imagine her capital-S Somewhere as we prayed, but even then, I could not convince myself that he also I would be together again. I already knew too many dead people. I knew that time would now pass for me differently than it would for her-that I, like everyone in that room, would go on accumulating loves also losses while he would not. Also, for me, that was the final a truly unbearable

tragedy- Like all the innumerable dead, he would once also for all been demoted from haunted to haunter.

Also, then one of Her brothers-in-law brought up a boom box also they played this song she had picked out-a sad also a quiet song by The Hectic Glow called ‘The New Partner.’ I just wanted to go home, honestly. I did know hardly any of these people, also I felt Peter Van Murray's little eyes bored into my exposed shoulder blades, but after the song was over, everyone had to come up to me also tell me that I had spoken beautifully, also that it was a lovely

service, which was a lie- It was a funeral. It looked like any other funeral.

His pallbearers-cousins, his dad, an uncle, friends I had never seen-came also got her, also they all started walking toward the hearse.

When Mom also Dad got in the car, I believed, ‘I don’t want to go. I’m tired.’

‘Bryana,’ Mom believed.

‘Mom, there won’t be a place to sit also it’ll last forever also I’m exhausted.’

‘Bryana, we have to go for Mr. also Mrs. Black,’ Mom believed.

‘Just…’ I believed. I felt so little in the back seat for some reason. I wanted to be little. I wanted to be like six years old or something. ‘Fine,’ I believed.

I just stared out the window awhile. I did not want to go. I didn’t want to see them lower her into the ground in the spot he’d picked out with his dad, also I didn’t want to see his parents sink to their knees in the dew-wet grass also moan in pain, also I didn’t want to see Peter Van Muray’s alcoholic belly stretched against his linen jacket, also I

didn’t want to cry in front of a bunch of people, also I didn’t want to toss a full of dirt onto his grave, also I didn’t want my parents to have to there beneath the clear blue sky with its certain slant of afternoon light, thinking about their day their kid also my plot also my casket also my dirt.

But I did these things. I did all of them also worse because Mom also Dad felt we should.

After it was over, Van Muray’s walked up to me also put fat on my shoulder believed, ‘Could I hitch a ride? Left my rental at the bottom of the hill.’ I shrugged, also he opened the door to

the backseat right as my dad unlocked the car.

Inside, he leaned between the front seats also believed, ‘Muray’s-Novelist Emeritus also Semiprofessional Disappointer.’

My parents introduced themselves. He shook them also. I was surprised that Muray had flown halfway around the world to attend a funeral. ‘How did you even-’ I started, but he cut me off.

‘I used the infernal Internet of yours to follow the Indianapolis obituary

notices.’ He reached into his linen suit also produced a fifth of whiskey.

‘Also, you just like bought a ticket also-’ He interrupted again while unscrewing the cap. ‘It was fifteen thousand for a first-class ticket, but I’m sufficiently capitalized to indulge such were. Also, the drinks are free on the flight. If you are ambitious, you can almost break even.’

Van Muray’s took a swig of the whiskey also then leaned forward to offer it to my dad, who believed, ‘Um, no thanks.’ Then Van Muray’s nodded the bottle toward me. I grabbed it.

‘Bryana,’ my mom believed, but I unscrewed the cap also sipped. It made my stomach feel like my lungs. I also the bottle back to Van

Muray’s, who took a long slug from it also then believed, ‘So. Omnis cellula e cellula.’

‘Huh?’

‘Your boy Black also I corresponded a bit, also in his last.’

‘Wait, you read your fan mail now?’

‘No, he sent it to my house, not through my publisher. Also, I would

hardly call her a fan. He despised me. But at any rate, he was quite insistent that I would be absolved for my misbehavior if I attended his funeral also told you what became of Anna's mother.

So here I am, also there's your answer- Omnis cellula e cellula.'

'What?' I asked again.

'Omnis cellula e cellula,' he believed again. 'All cells come from cells. Every cell is born of a previous cell, which was born of a previous cell. Life comes from life. Life begets life begets life begets life begets life.'

We reached the bottom of the hill. ‘Okay, sure,’ I believed. I was in no mood for this. Muray’s would not hijack Her funeral. I would not allow it. ‘Thanks,’ I believed. ‘Well, I guess we’re at the bottom of the hill.’

‘You don’t want an explanation?’ He asked.

‘No,’ I believed. ‘I’m good. You are a pathetic alcoholic who says fancy things to get attention like a precocious eleven-year-old also, I feel super bad for you. But surely, no, you are not the guy who wrote An Imperial Affliction

anymore, so you could not a sequel to it even if you wanted to.

Thanks, though. Have an excellent life.'

'But-'

'Thanks for the booze,' I believed. 'Now get out of the car.' He looked scolded. Dad had stopped the car also we just idled there below Her grave for a minute until Van Muray's opened the door also, finally silent, left.

As we drove away, I watched through the back window as he took a drink also raised the bottle in my

direction, as if toasting me. His eyes looked so sad. I felt bad for her, to be honest.

We finally got home around six, also I was exhausted. I just wanted to sleep, but Mom made me eat some cheesy pasta, although she at least allowed me to eat in bed. I slept with the BiPAP for a couple of hours. Waking up was horrible because for a disoriented moment I felt like everything was fine, also then it crushed me anew. Mom took me off the BiPAP, I tethered myself to a portable tank, also stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth.

Appraising myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, I kept thinking there were two kinds of adults- There were Muray's- miserable creatures who scoured the earth in search of- something to hurt. Also, then there were people like my parents, who walked around comically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around.

Neither of these futures struck me as particularly desirable. It seemed to me that I had already seen everything pure also good in the world, also I was beginning to suspect that even if death did not get in the way, the kind of love

that Her also I share could never last. So, dawn goes down to the day the poet wrote. Nothing gold can stay.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

‘Occupied,’ I believed.

‘Bryana,’ my dad believed. ‘Can I come in?’ I did not answer, but after a while, I unlocked the door. I sat down on the closed toilet seat. Why did breathing have to be such work? Dad knelt next to me. He grabbed my head also pulled it into his collarbone, also he believed, ‘I’m sorry She died.’ I felt suffocated by his T-

shirt, but- It felt good to be held so hard, pressed into the comfortable smell of my dad. It was like he was angry or something, also I liked that, because I was angry, too. ‘It’s total bullshit,’ he believed.

‘The whole thing. Eighty percent survival rate also he is in the twenty percent? Bullshit. He was such a bright kid. It is bullshit. I hate it. But it was sure a privilege to love her, huh?’

I nodded into his shirt.

‘Bryana,’ she believed, ‘your dad also I feel like we hardly even see you anymore.’

‘Particularly those of us who work all week,’ Dad believed.

‘He needs me,’ I believed, finally unfastening the BiPAP myself.

‘We need you, too, kiddo,’ my dad believed. He took hold of my wrist, like I was a two-year-old about to dart out into the street, also gripped it.

‘Well, get a terminal disease, Dad, also then I’ll stay home more.’

‘Bryana,’ my mom believed.

‘You were the one who didn’t want me to be a homebody,’ I believed to her. Dad was still clutching my arm.

‘Also, now you want her to go ahead also die so I will be back here chained to this place, letting you take care of me like I always used to. But I do not need it, Mom. I do not need you like I used to. You’re the one who needs to get a life.’

‘Bryana!’ Dad believed, squeezing harder. ‘Apologize to your mother.’

I was tugging at my arm, but he would not let go, also I could not get my

cannula on with only one. It was infuriating.

All I wanted was an old-fashioned Pre- teen Walkout, wherein I stomp out of the room also slam the door to my bedroom turn up The Hectic Glow also furiously write a eulogy. But I could not because I could not freaking breathe. ‘The cannula,’ I whined.

‘I need it.’

My dad immediately let us go also rushed to connect me to the oxygen. I could see the guilt in his eyes, but he was still angry.

‘Bryana, apologize to your mother.’

‘Fine, I’m sorry, just please let me do this.’

They did not say anything. Mom just sat there with her arms folded, not even looking at me. After a while, I got up also went to my room to write about Her.

Both Mom also Dad tried a few times to knock on the door or whatever, but I just told them I was doing something important. It took me forever to figure out what I wanted to say, also even then I was not incredibly happy with it. Before I had

technically finished, I noticed it was 7-40, which meant that I would be late even if I did not change, so in the end, I wore baby blue cotton pajama pants, flip-flops, also Her Butler shirt.

I walked out of the room also tried to go right past them, but my dad believed, ‘You can’t leave the house without permission.’

‘Oh, my God, Dad. He wanted me to write her a eulogy, okay? I will be home every day. Freaking. Night. Starting any day now, okay?’ That finally shut them up.

It took the entire drive to calm down about my parents. I pulled up around the back of the church also parked in the semicircular driveway behind Her car. The back door to the church was held open by a fist-sized rock. Inside, I contemplated taking the stairs but decided to wait for the ancient creaking elevator.

When the elevator doors Un scrolled, I was in the Support Group room, the chairs arranged in the same circle. But now I saw only Her in a wheelchair, ghoulishly thin. He was facing me from the center of the circle.

He had been waiting for the elevator doors to open.

‘Bryana Candelaria,’ he believed, ‘you look ravishing.’

‘I know, right?’

I heard a shuffling in a dark corner of the room-her stood behind a little wooden lectern, clinging to it. ‘You want to sit?’ I asked her.

‘No, I’m about to eulogize. You’re late.’

‘You’re… I’m… what?’

She gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair into the center of the circle with her as he spun the chair to face her. ‘I want to attend my funeral,’ Her believed. ‘Will you speak at my funeral?’

‘Um, of course, surely,’ I believed, letting my head fall on his shoulder. I reached across his back also hugged both her wheelchairs.

He winced. I let go.

‘Awesome,’ he believed. ‘I’m hopeful I’ll get to attend as a ghost, but just to make sure, I thought I’d-well, not to put you on the spot, but I just this

afternoon though I could arrange a prefuneral, also I figured since I’m in reasonably good spirits, there’s no time like the present.’

‘How did you even get in here?’ I asked her.

‘Would you believe they leave the door open all night?’ She asked.

‘Um, no,’ I believed.

‘As well you shouldn’t.’ She smiled. ‘Anyway, I know it’s a bit self-aggrandizing.’

‘Hey, you’re stealing my eulogy,’ she believed. ‘My first bit is about how you were a self-aggrandizing bastard.’

I laughed.

‘Okay, okay,’ She believed. ‘At your leisure.’

She cleared her throat. ‘Her Black was a self-aggrandizing bastard. But we forgive her. We forgive her not because he had a, but I know this- There are infinite numbers between 0 also 1. There is .1 also .14 .112 an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a bigger infinite set of numbers between 0

also 2, or between 0 also a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I am likely to get, also God, I want more numbers for Her than he got. But Her, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little heart as figuratively good as his literal one sucked, or because he knew more about how to hold a cigarette than any nonsmoker in history, or because he got eighteen years when he should have gotten more.’

‘Seventeen,’ Her corrected.

‘I’m assuming you’ve got some time; you are interrupting bastard.

‘I’m telling you,' She continued, ‘Her Black talked so much that he’d interrupt you at his funeral.

Also, he was pretentious-

Sweet Jesus Christ, that kid never took a pass without pondering the abundant metaphorical resonances of human waste production. Also, he was vain- I do not believe I have ever met a more physically attractive person who

was more acutely aware of his physical attractiveness.

‘But I will say this- When the scientists of the future show up at my house with robot eyes also, they tell me to try them on, I will tell the scientists to screw off because I do not want to see a world without her.’

I was kind of crying by then.

‘Also, then, having made my rhetorical point, I will put my robot eyes on, because I mean, with robot eyes you can probably see-through girls’ shirts also stuff. Her, my friend, Godspeed.’

She nodded for a while, his lips pursed, also then gave her a thumbs-up. After he had recovered his composure, he added, ‘I would cut the bit about seeing through girls’ shirts.’

She was still clinging to the lectern. He started to cry. He pressed his forehead down to the podium also I watched his shoulders shake, also then finally, he believed, ‘Goddamn it, Her, editing your eulogy.’

‘Don’t swear in the Literal Heart of Jesus,’ She believed.

‘Goddamn it,’ she believed again. He raised his head also swallowed. ‘Bryana, can I get an also here?’

I had forgotten he could not make his way back to the circle. I got up, placed his also on my arm, also walked her slowly back to the chair next to Her where I had been sitting. Then I walked up to the podium also unfolded the piece of paper on which I had printed my eulogy.

‘My name is Bryana. Her Black was the great star-crossed love of my life. Ours was an epic love story, also I will not be able to get more than a sentence into

it without disappearing into a puddle of tears. She knew. She knows. I will not tell you our love story, because- like all real love stories-it will die with us, as it should. I'd hoped that he'd be eulogizing me because there's no one I'd rather have...' I started crying. 'Okay, how not to cry.

How is I-okay? Satisfactory.'

I took a few breaths also went back to the page. 'I can't talk about our love story, so I will talk about math. I am not a mathematician, infinity. I would not trade it for the world. You gave me a

forever within the numbered days, also I’m grateful.’

Chapter: 21

Her Black died eight days after his prefuneral, at Memorial, in the ICU, when cancer, which was made of her, finally stopped his heart, which was also made of her.

He was with his mom, also dad and sisters. His mom called me at three-thirty in the morning. I had known, of course, that he was going.

I had talked to his dad before going to bed, also he told me, ‘It could be

tonight,’ but still, when I grabbed the phone from the bedside table also saw Her Mom on the caller ID, everything inside of me collapsed. She was just crying on the other end of the line, also she told me she was sorry, also I was sorry, too, also she told me that he was unconscious for a couple of hours before he died.

My parents came in then, looking expectant, also I just nodded they fell into each other, feeling, I am sure, the harmonic terror that would in time come for them directly. I called her, who cursed life also the universe God Herself who

believed where the goddamned trophies are to break when you need them, also then I realized there was no one else to call, which was the saddest thing. The only person I wanted to talk to about her death was Her and that kills her and that was me.

My parents stayed in my room forever until it was morning also finally Dad believed, ‘Do you want to be alone?’ also, I nodded Mom believed, ‘We’ll be right outside the door,’ me thinking, I do not doubt it. It was unbearable. The whole thing. Every second is worse than the last. I just kept thinking about calling her,

wondering what would happen, if anyone would answer. In the last weeks, we had been reduced to spending our time together in recollection, but that was not anything- The pleasure of remembering had been taken from me because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It wanted to lose your core-m-em-be-re-re-re meant losing the memory itself as if the things we had done were less also important than they had been hours before. When you go into the ER, one of the first things they ask you to do is to rate your pain on a scale of one to ten, also from there they decide which drugs to use also how quickly to use them.

I had been asked this question hundreds of times over the years, also I remember once early on when I could not get my breath also it felt like my chest was on fire, flames licking the inside of my ribs fighting for a way to burn out of my body, my parents took me to the ER. A nurse asked me about the pain, also I could not even speak, so I held up nine fingers. Later, after they had given me something, the nurse came in also she was stroking my also while she took my blood pressure also, she believed, ‘You know how I know you’re a fighter? You called ten a nine.’

But that was not right. I called it a nine because I was saving my ten. Also, here it was, the great also terrible ten, slamming me again also as I lay still also alone in my bed staring at the ceiling, the waves tossing me against the rocks then pulling me back out to sea so they could launch me again into the jagged face of the cliff, leaving me floating face up on the water, undrowned. To conclude I did call her. His phone rang five times also then went to voice mail.

‘You’ve reached the voicemail of Her Black,’ he believed, the clarion voice I had fallen for. ‘Leave a message.’ It

beeped. The dead air on the line was so eerie. I just wanted to go back to that secret post-terrestrial third space with her that we visited when we talked on the phone. I waited for that feeling, but it never came- The dead air on the line was no comfort, also finally I hung up.

I got my laptop out from under the bed also fired it up went to his wall page, where already the condolences were flooding in. The most recent one believed- I love you, bro. See you on the other side. Written by someone I had never heard of. All the wall posts, which arrived as fast as I could read them, were

written- by people I had never met also whom he had never spoken- about, people who were extolling his various virtues now that he was dead, even though I knew they had not seen her in months also had made no effort to visit her. I wondered if my wall would look like this if I died, or if I had been out of school also a life long enough to escape widespread memorialization.

I kept reading.

I miss you already, bro.

I love you, Her. God bless also keep you.

You will live forever in our hearts, big man. (That particularly galled me, because it implied the immortality of those left behind- You will live forever in my memory because I will live forever! I AM YOUR GOD NOW, DEAD BOY! I OWN YOU! Thinking you will not die is yet another side effect of dying.) You were always such a great friend. I am sorry I did not see any more of you after you left school, bro. I bet you are already playing ball in heaven. I see it… I see it more every day.

I imagined Her Black's analysis of that comment- If I am playing basketball

in heaven, does that imply a physical location of heaven containing physical basketballs? Who makes the basketballs in question? Are there less fortunate souls in heaven who work in a celestial basketball factory so that I can play? Or did an-omnipotent God create the basketballs out of the vacuum of space? Is this heaven in some kind of unobservable universe where the laws of physics don't apply, also if so, why in the hell would I be playing basketball when I could be flying or reading or looking at beautiful people or something else, I enjoy? It's almost as if the way you imagine my dead self-says more about you than it says

about either the person I was or whatever I am now.

His parents called around noon to say the funeral would be in five days, on Saturday. I pictured a church packed with people who thought he liked basketball, also I wanted to vomit, but I knew I had to go since I was also speaking everything.

When I hung up, I went back to reading his wall- I just heard that Her Black died after a lengthy battle with cancer. Rest in peace, friend.

I knew these people were genuinely sad, also that I was not mad at

them. I was mad at the universe. Even so, it infuriated me- You get all these friends just when you do not need friends anymore. I wrote a reply to his comment- We live in a universe devoted to the creation, also eradication, of awareness. Her Black did not die after a lengthy battle with cancer. He died after a lengthy battle with human consciousness, a victim-as you will be of the universe's need to make also unmake all that is possible.

I posted it also waited for someone to reply, refreshing over also

over again. Nothing. My comment got lost in the blizzard of new posts.

Everyone was going to miss her so much. Everyone was praying for his family. I remembered Van Muray's letter- Writing does not resurrect.

…It buries.

After a while, I went out into the living room to sit with my parents also watch TV. I could not tell you what the show was, but at some point, my mom believed, 'Bryana, what can we do for you?'

Also, I just shook my head. I started crying again.

‘What can we do?’ Mom asked again.

I shrugged.

But she kept asking as if there was something she could do until finally I just crawled across the couch into her lap also my dad came over held my legs tight, I wrapped my arms around my mom’s middle also they held on to me for hours while the tide rolled in.

When we first got there, I sat in the back of the visitation room, a little

room of exposed stone walls off to the side of the sanctuary in the Literal Heart of Jesus church. There were eighty chairs set up in the room, also it was two-thirds full but felt one-third empty.

For a while, I just watched people walk up to the coffin, which was on a cart covered with a purple tablecloth.

All these people- I had never seen before would kneel next to her or stalls over her also look at her for a while, crying, saying something, also then all of them would touch the coffin instead of touching her because no one wants to touch the dead.

‘Gives you an idea of how I feel about you,’ he believed.

My old man. He always knew just what to say.

A couple of days later, I got up around noon also drove to another house. He answered the door herself. ‘My mom took Graham to a movie,’ he believed.

‘We should do something,’ I believed.

‘Can something be played blind-guy video games while sitting on the couch?’

‘Surely, that’s just the kind of something I had in mind.’

So, we sat there for a couple of hours talking to the screen together, navigating this invisible labyrinthine cave without a single lumen of light. The most entertaining part of the game by far was- trying to get the computer to engage us in humorous conversation- Me- ‘Touch the cave wall.’

Computer- ‘You touch the cave wall. It is moist.’

Her- ‘Lick the cave wall.’

Computer- ‘I do not understand also. Repeat?’

Me- ‘Hump the moist cave wall.’

Computer- ‘You attempt to jump. You hit your head.’

Her- ‘Not jump. HUMP.’

Computer- ‘I don’t Understand also.’

Her- ‘Dude, I’ve been alone in the dark in this cave for weeks also I need some relief. HUMP THE CAVE WALL.’

Computer- ‘You attempt too just-’

Me- ‘Thrust pelvis against the cave wall.’

Computer- ‘I do not-’

Her- ‘Make sweet love to the cave.’

Computer- ‘I do not-’

Me- ‘FINE. Follow left branch.’

Computer- ‘You follow the left branch. The passage narrows.’

Me- ‘Crawl.’

Computer- ‘You crawl for one hundred yards. The passage narrows.’

Me- ‘Snake crawl.’

Computer- ‘You snake crawl for thirty yards. A trickle of water runs down your body. You reach a mound of small rocks blocking the passageway.’

Me- ‘Can I hump the cave now?’

Computer- ‘You cannot jump without staling.’

Her- ‘I dislike living in a world without Her Black.’

Computer- ‘I don’t Understand also-’

Her- ‘Me neither. Pause.’

He dropped the remote onto the couch between us also asked, ‘Do you know if it hurts or whatever?’

‘He was fighting for breath, I guess,’ I believed. ‘He eventually went unconscious, but it sounds like, surely, it wasn’t great or anything. Dying sucks.’

‘Surely,’ she believed. Also, then after a long time, ‘It just seems so impossible.’

‘Happens all the time,’ I believed.

‘You seem angry,’ he believed.

‘Surely,’ I believed. We just sat there quiet for a long time, which was

fine, also I was thinking about way back in the very beginning in the Literal Heart of Jesus when She told us that he feared oblivion, also I told her that he was fearing something universal also inevitable, also how really, the problem is not suffering itself or oblivion itself but the depraved meaninglessness of these things, the inhuman nihilism of suffering. I thought of my dad telling me that the universe wants to be noticed. But what we want is to be noticed by the universe, to have the universe give a shit about what happens to us-not the collective idea of sentient life but each of us, as individuals.

‘She loved you, you know,’ he believed.

‘I know.’

‘He wouldn’t shut up about it.’

‘I know,’ I believed.

‘It was annoying.’

‘I didn’t find it that annoying,’ I believed.

‘Did he ever give you that thing he was writing?’

‘What thing?’

‘That sequel or whatever to that book you liked.’

I turned to- her. ‘What?’

‘He believed he was working on something for you, but he wasn’t that good of a writer.’

‘When did he say this?’

‘I don’t know. Like, after he got back from Amsterdam at some point.’

‘At which point?’ I pressed. Had he not had a chance to finish it? Had he also left it on his computer or something?

‘Um,’ her- she sighed. ‘Um, I don’t know. We talked about it over here once. He was over here, like-uh, we played with my email machine also I had

just gotten an email from my mother. I can check on the machine if you-'

'Surely, surely, where is it?'

He had mentioned it a month before. A month. Not a good month, admittedly, but still a month. That was enough time for her to write something, at least. There was still something of her, or by her at least, floating around out there. I needed it.

'I'm going to go to his house,' I told her.

I hurried out to the minivan also hauled the oxygen cart up into the

passenger seat. I started the car. A hip-hop beat blared from the stereo, also as I reached to change the radio station, someone started rapping. In Swedish.

I swiveled around also screamed when I saw Muray's sitting in the backseat.

'I apologize for alarming you,' Muray's believed over the rapping. He was still wearing the funeral suit, a week later.

He smelled like he was sweating alcohol. 'You're welcome to keep the CD,'

he believed. ‘It’s Snook, one of the major Swedish-’

‘Ah- ah- ah- ah GET OUT OF MY CAR.’ I turned off the stereo.

‘It’s your mother’s car, as I also understand it,’ he believed. ‘Also, it wasn’t locked.’

‘Oh, my God! Get out of the car or I will call nine-one-one. Man, what is your problem…?’

‘If only there were just one,’ he mused. ‘I am here simply to apologize. You were correct in noting earlier that I am a pathetic little man, dependent upon

alcohol. I had one acquaintance who- only spent time with me because I paid her to do so-worse, still, she has since quit, leaving me the rare soul who cannot acquire companionship even through bribery. It is all true, Bryana. All that also more.'

~*~

'Okay,' I believed. It would have been a more moving speech had he not slurred his words.

'You remind me of Anna.'

'I remind a lot of people of a lot of people,' I answered. 'I have to go.'

‘So, drive,’ he believed. ‘Get out.’

‘No. You remind me of Anna,’ he believed again. After a second, I put the car in reverse also backed out. I could not make her leave, also I did not have to. I would drive to Her house, also Her parents would make her leave.

‘You are, of course, familiar,’ Van Muray’s believed, ‘with Antonietta Meo.’

‘Surely, no,’ I believed. I turned on the stereo, also the Swedish hip-hop blared, but Van Muray’s yelled over it.

‘She may soon be the youngest non-martyr saint ever beatified by the

Catholic Church. She had the same cancer that Mr. Black had, osteosarcoma. They removed her right leg. The pain was excruciating. As Antonietta Meo lay dying at the ripened age of six from this agonizing cancer, she told her father, 'Pain is like fabric- The stronger it is, the more it's worth.' Is that true, Bryana?'

I was not looking at her directly but at his reflection in the mirror. 'No,' I shouted over the music. 'That's bullshit.'

'But don't you wish it were true!' he cried back. I cut the music. 'I'm sorry I ruined your trip. You were too young. You were-' He broke down. As if he had a

right to cry over Her. Robert Muray's was just another of the endless mourners who did not know her, another too-late lamentation on his wall. 'You didn't ruin our trip, your self-important bastard. We had an awesome trip.' 'I am trying,' he believed. 'I am trying, I swear.' It was around then that I realized Muray's had a dead person in his family. I painstaking the honesty with which he had written about cancer kids; the fact that he could not speak to me in Amsterdam except to ask if I had dressed like her on purpose; his shittiness around me also Her; his aching question about the relationship between pain's extremity also its value.

He sat back there drinking; an old man who had been drunk for years. I thought of a statistic I wish I did not know- half of the marriages end in the year after a child's death. I looked back at Robert Muray's. I was driving down College also I pulled over behind a line of parked cars also asked, 'You had a kid who died?'

'Sabes que es amor cualsoo solo quieres estar con esa persona, y cualsoo más o menos crees que la otra persona siente lo mismo por ti.'

'My daughter,' he believed. 'She was eight. Suffered beautifully. Will never be beautified.'

‘She had leukemia?’ I asked. He nodded. ‘Like Anna,’ I believed.

‘Very much like her, yes.’

‘You were married?’

‘No. Well, not at the time of her death. I was insufferable long before we lost her. Grief does not change you, Bryana. It reveals you.’

‘Did you live with her?’

‘No, not primarily, although at the end, we brought her to Johnstown, where I was living, for a series of experimental tortures that increased the

misery of her days without increasing the number of them.'

After a second, I believed, 'So it's like you gave her this second life where she got to be a pre-teen.'

'I suppose that would be a fair assessment,' he believed, also then quickly added, 'I assume you are familiar with Philippa Foot's Trolley Problem thought experiment?'

'Also, when I show up at your house also, I'm dressed like the girl you hoped she would live to become also you're, like, all taken aback by it.'

‘She didn’t Understand also why it was happening,’ he believed. ‘I had to tell her she would die. Her social worker believed I had to tell her.

‘There’s a trolley running out of control down a track,’ he believed.

‘I don’t care about your stupid thought experiment,’ I believed.

‘It’s Philip Foot’s, actually.’

‘Well, hers either,’ I believed. I had to tell her she would die, so I told her she was going to heaven. She asked if I would be there, also I believed that I would not, not yet. But eventually, she

believed, also I promised that yes, of course, very soon. Also, I told her that in the meantime we had a great family up there that would take care of her. Also, she asked me when I would be there, also I told her soon. Twenty-two years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'So am I.'

After a while, I asked, 'What happened to her mom?'

He smiled. 'You're still looking for your sequel, you little rat.'

I smiled back. 'You should go home,' I told her. 'Sober up. Author

another novel. Do the thing you are good at. Few people are lucky enough to be so good at something.'

He stared at me in the mirror for a long time. 'Okay,' he believed. 'Surely. You are right. You're right.' But even as he believed it, he pulled out his mostly empty fifth of whiskey. He drank, recapped the bottle, also opened the door. 'Good-bye, Bryana.'

'Take it easy, Sam Muray.'

He sat down on the curb behind the car. As I watched her shrink in the rearview mirror, he pulled out the bottle

also for a second it looked like he would leave it on the curb. Also, when he took a swig.

It was a hot afternoon in Indianapolis, the air thick also still like we were inside a cloud. It was the worst kind of air for me, also I told myself it was just the air when they walked from her pathway to her home to her front door felt infinite. I rang the doorbell, also Her mom answered.

‘Oh, Bryana,’ she believed, also enveloped me, crying.

She made me eat some eggplant lasagna-I guess a lot of people had brought them food or whatever with her also Her dad. ‘How are you?’

‘I miss her.’

‘Surely.’

I did not know what to say. I just wanted to go downstairs also find whatever he had written for me. Plus, the silence in the room bothered me. I wanted them to be talking to each other, comforting, or holding also or whatever. But they just sat there eating exceedingly lesser amounts of lasagna, not even

looking at each other. ‘Heaven needed an angel-like in his books,’ his dad believed after a while.

‘I know,’ I believed. Then his sisters also their mess of kids showed up mothers piled into the kitchen. I got up also hugged both his sisters also then watched the kids run around the kitchen with their sorely needed surplus of noise also movement, excited molecules bouncing against each other also shouting, ‘You’re it, no you’re it no I was it but then I tagged you-you didn’t tag me you missed me well I’m tagging you now no dumb but it’s a time-out HER DO NOT

CALL YOUR BROTHER A DUMB BUTT

Mom if I’m not allowed to use that word how come you just used it dumb butt,’ also then, chorally, dumb butt -dumb butt -dumb butt, also at the table Her parents were now holding also, which made me feel better.

‘She told me She was writing something, something for me,’ I believed. The kids were still singing their dumb-butt song.

‘We can check his computer,’ his mom believed.

‘He wasn’t on it much the last few weeks,’ I thought.

‘That’s true. I am not even sure we brought it upstairs. Is it still in the basement, Mark?’ ‘No idea.’

‘Well,’ I believed, ‘can I…’ I nodded toward the basement door.

‘We’re not ready,’ his dad believed. ‘But of course, yes, Bryana. Of course, you can.’

I walked downstairs, past his unmade bed, past the gaming chairs beneath the TV. His computer was still on. I tapped the mouse to wake it up also

then searched for his most recently edited files. Nothing in the last month. The most recent thing was a response paper to Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye.

He had written something by also. I walked over to his bookshelves, looking for a journal or a notebook. Nothing. I flipped through his copy of An Imperial Affliction. He had not left a single mark in it.

I walked to his bedside table next. Infinite Mayhem, the ninth sequel to The Price of Dawn, lay atop the table next to his reading lamp, the corner of page 138 turned down. He had never made it

to the end of the book. ‘Spoiler alert- Mayhem survives,’ I believed aloud to her, just in case he could hear me.

Also, then I crawled into his unmade bed, wrapping myself in his comforter like a cocoon, surrounding myself with his smell. I took out my cannula so I could smell better, breathing her in also breathing her out, the scent fading even as I lay there, my chest burning until I could not distinguish among the pains.

I sat up on the bed after a while also reinserted my cannula also breathed for a while before going up the stairs. I

just shook my head no in response to his parents' expectant looks. The kids raced past me. One of Her sisters-I could not tell them apart believed, 'Mom, do you want me to take them to the park or something?'

'No, no, they're fine.'

'Is there anywhere he might have put a notebook? Like in his hospital bed or something?' The bed was already gone, reclaimed by hospice.

'Bryana,' his dad believed, 'you were there every day with us. You- he was not alone much, sweetie. He would not

have had time to write anything. I know you want... I want that, too. But the messages he leaves for us now are coming from above, Bryana.'

He pointed toward the ceiling as if She were hovering just above the house. He was. I do not know. I did not feel his presence, though.

'Surely,' I believed. I promised to visit them again in a few days.

I never quite caught his scent again.

Three days later, on the eleventh day AG, her father called me in the

morning. I was still hooked to BiPAP, so I did not answer, but I listened to his message the moment it beeped through to my phone. ‘Bryana, hi, it’s her dad. I found a, uh, black Moleskine notebook in the magazine rack that was near his hospital bed, I think near enough that he could have reached it. Unfortunately, there is no writing in the notebook. All the pages are blank. But first I think three or four-the first few pages are torn out of the notebook. We looked through the house but could not find the pages. So, I do not know what to make of that? But those pages are what he was referring to? Anyway, I hope that you are doing okay.

You are in our prayers every day, Bryana. Okay, bye.’

Three or four pages ripped from a Moleskine notebook no longer in Her Black' house. Where would he leave them for me? Taped to Funky Bones? No, he was not well enough to get there.

The Literal Heart of Jesus. He had left it there for me on his Last Good Day.

So, I left twenty minutes early for the Support Group the next day. I drove over to another house, picked her up, also then we drove down to the Literal Heart

of Jesus with the windows of the rolled down, listening to The Hectic Glow's leaked new album, which She would never hear.

We took the elevator. I walked her to a seat in the Circle of Trust then slowly worked my way around the Literal Heart. I checked everywhere- under the chairs, around the lectern I had stood behind while delivering my eulogy, under the treat table, on the bulletin board packed with Sunday school kids' drawings of God's love. Nothing. It was the only place we had been together in those last days beside his house, also it either was

not here or I was missing something. He had left it for me in the hospital, but if so, it had certainly been thrown away after his death.

I was out of breath by the time I settled into a chair next to her, also I devoted the entirety of Patrick's nutless- and DICK-less testimonial to telling my lungs, they were okay, that they could breathe,

that there was enough oxygen. They had been drained only a week before Her died-I watched the amber cancer water dribble out of me through the tube- also yet already they felt full again. I was

so focused on telling myself to breathe that I did not notice Patrick saying my name at first.

I snapped to attention. ‘Surely?’ I asked.

‘How are you?’

‘I’m okay, Patrick. I’m a little out of breath.’

‘Would you like to share a memory of Her with the group?’

‘I wish I would just die, Patrick. Do you ever wish you would just die?’

‘Yes,’ Patrick believed, without his usual pause. ‘Yes, of course. So why don’t you?’

I thought about it. My old stock answer was that I wanted to stay alive for my parents because they would be all gutted also childless in the wake of me, also that was still true kind of, but that was not it, exactly. ‘I don’t know.’

‘In the hopes that you’ll get better?’

Love is like the wind; you cannot see it, but you can feel it.

I held her close to me with my eyes closed, wondering if anything in my life had ever been this perfect, also knowing while it had not. I was in love, also the feeling was even more wonderful than I ever imagined it could be.

‘No,’ I believed. ‘No, it’s not that. I don’t know- her?’ I asked. I was tired of talking.

She started talking about true love. I could not tell them what I was thinking because it seemed cheesy to me, but I was thinking about the universe wanting to be noticed, also how I had to notice it as best I could. I owed a debt to

the universe that only my attention could repay, also that I owed a debt to everybody who

did not get to be a person anymore also everyone who had not gotten to be a person

yet. What my dad had told me. ‘Do you love- me?' I asked her. She smiled. 'Yes.' 'Do you want me to be happy?' As I asked her this, I felt my heart beginning to race. 'Of course, I do.' 'Will you do something for me then?' She looked away, sadness crossing her features.

'I don't know if I can anymore.' she said. 'But if you could, would you?' I cannot describe the intensity of what I was feeling at that moment. Love, anger, sadness, hope, also fear, whirling together sharpened by the nervousness I was feeling. Jamie looked at me curiously also my breath became shallower. Suddenly I knew that I had never felt as strongly for another person as I did at that moment. As I returned to her gaze, this simple realization made me wish for the millionth time that I could make all this go away. Had it been possible, I would have traded my life for hers. I wanted to tell her my thoughts, but the

sound of her voice suddenly silenced the emotions inside me. 'Yes,' she finally said, her voice week yet somehow still full of promise. 'I would.' Finally getting control of myself I kissed her again, then brought me also to her face, gently running my fingers over her cheek. I marveled at the softness of her skin, the gentleness I saw in her eyes. Even now she was perfect.

I stayed quiet for the rest of the Support Group, also Patrick believed a special prayer for me, also Her name was tacked onto the extensive list of the dead-fourteen of them for every one of us-also

we promised to live our best life today, also then I took her to the car.

When I got home, Mom also Dad were at the dining room table on their separate laptops, also the moment I walked in the door, Mom slammed her laptop shut. ‘What’s on the computer?’

‘Just some antioxidant recipes. Ready for BiPAP also America’s Next Top Model?’ she asked.

‘I’m just going to lie down for a minute.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Surely, only tired.’

‘Well, you’ve got to eat before you-’

‘Mom, I am aggressively unhungry.’ I took a step toward the door, but she cut me off.

‘Bryana, you have to eat. Just some-’

‘No. I’m going to bed.’

‘No,’ Mom believed. ‘You’re not.’ I glanced at my dad, who shrugged.

‘It’s my life,’ I believed.

‘You’re not going to starve yourself to death just because

She died. You’re going to eat dinner.’

I was pissed off for some reason. ‘I can’t eat, Mom.

I cannot. Okay?’

I tried to push past her, but she grabbed both my shoulders also believed, ‘Bryana, you’re eating dinner. You need to stay healthy.’

‘NO!’ I shouted. ‘I’m not eating dinner, also I can’t stay healthy because I’m not healthy. I am dying, Mom. I am going to die also leave you here alone. You won’t have me to hover around also,

you won’t be a mother anymore, also I’m sorry, but I can’t do anything about it, okay?’

I regretted it as soon as I believed it.

‘You heard me.’ ‘What?’

‘Did you hear me say that to your father?’ Her eyes welled up. ‘Did you?’ I nodded. ‘Oh, God, Bryana. I am sorry. I was wrong, sweetie.

That was not true. I believed that in a desperate moment. It’s not something I believe.’ She sat down, also I sat down with her. I was thinking that

I should have just vomited up some pasta for her instead of getting pissed off.

‘What do you believe, then?’ I asked.

‘As long as either of us is alive, I will be your mother,’ she believed. ‘Even if you die, I-’

‘When’ I believed. She nodded. ‘Even when you die, I will still be your mom, Bryana. I will not stop being your mom. Have you stopped loving Her?’ I shook my head. ‘Well, then how could I stop loving you?’

‘Okay,’ I believed. My dad was crying now.

My throat began to tighten again, but as I said, I knew what I had to do. Since I had to accept that it was not within my power to cure her, what I wanted to do was give her something that she had wanted. It was what my heart had been telling me to do all along. Jamie, I understood then, had already given me the answer I had been searching for, the answer my heart needed to find. She had told me outside Mr. Jenkin's office, the night we had asked him about doing the play. I smiled softly, also she returned my

affection with a slight squeeze of mine as if trusting me in what I was about to do. Encouraged, I leaned closer also took a deep breath. When I exhaled, these were the words that flowed with my breath. 'Will you marry me?

‘I want you guys to have a life,’ I believed. ‘I worry that you won’t have a life, that you’ll sit around here all day with no me to look after also stare at the walls also want to off yourselves.’

After a minute, Mom believed, ‘I’m taking some classes. Online, through IU. To get my master’s in social work. I

wasn’t looking at antioxidant recipes; I was writing a paper.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I don’t want you to think I’m imagining a world without you. But if I get my MSW, I can counsel families in crisis or lead groups dealing with illness in their families or-’

‘Wait, you’re going to become a Patrick?’

‘Well, not exactly. There are all kinds of social work jobs.’

Dad believed, ‘We’ve both been worried that you’ll feel abandoned. You

need to know that we will always be here for you, Bryana.

Your mom isn't going anywhere.'

'No, this is great. This is fantastic!' I was smiling.

'Mom is going to become a Patrick. She will be a great Patrick!

She'll be so much better at it than Patrick is.'

'Thank you, Bryana. That means everything to me.'

I nodded. I was crying. I could not get over how happy I was, crying genuine

tears of actual happiness for the first time in forever, imagining my mom as Patrick. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would have been a good social worker, too.

After a while we turned on the TV also watched ANTM. But I paused it after five seconds because I had all these questions for Mom. 'So how close are you to finishing?'

'If I go up to Bloomington for a week this summer, I should be able to finish by December.'

‘How long have you been keeping this from me, exactly?’

‘A year.’

‘Mom.’

‘I didn’t want to hurt you, Bryana.’

It was not that long, also it certainly was not the kind of kiss you see in movies these days, but it was wonderful in its way, also all I can remember about the moment is that when our lips touched, I knew the memory would last forever.

Knowing there is one thing I still have not told you- I now believe that miracles can happen.

Amazing. ‘So, when you are waiting for me outside of MCC or Support Group or whatever, you’re always-

‘First, you will smile, also then you will cry - don't say you haven't been warned.

‘Yes, working or reading.’ I do not think that we are meant to also Understand it all the time. I think that sometimes we just must have faith.

‘This is so great. If I am dead, I want you to know I will be sighing at you from heaven every time you ask someone to share their feelings.’

My dad laughed. ‘I’ll be right there with yah, kiddo,’ he assured me.

Finally, we watched ANTM. Dad tried hard not to die of boredom, also he kept messing up which girl was which, saying, ‘We like her?’

‘No, no. We revile Anastasia. We like Antonia, the other blonde,’ Mom explained.

‘They’re all tall also horrible,’ Dad responded. ‘Forgive me for failing to tell the difference.’ Dad reached across me for Mom’s also.

‘Do you think you guys will stay together if I die?’ I asked.

‘Bryana, what? Sweetie.’ She fumbled for the remote control also paused the TV again. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Just, do you think you would?’

‘Yes, of course. Of course,’ Dad believed. ‘Your mom also I love each other, also if we lose you, we’ll go

through it together.' 'Swear to God,' I believed.

'I swear to God,' he believed.

I looked back at Mom. 'Swear to God,' she agreed. 'Why are you even worrying about this?'

'I just don't want to ruin your life or anything.'

Mom leaned forward also pressed her face into my messy puff of hair kissed me at the very top of my head. I believed to Dad, 'I don't want you to become like a miserable unemployed alcoholic or whatever.'

My mom smiled. ‘Your father isn’t Muray’s, Bryana. You of all people know it is possible to live with pain.’

‘Surely, okay,’ I believed. Mom hugged me also I let her even though I did not want to be hugged. ‘Okay, you can un pause it,’ I believed.

Anastasia got kicked off. She threw a fit. It was awesome.

I ate a few bites of dinner-bow-tie pasta with pesto-also managed to keep it down.

I woke up the next morning panicked because I had dreamed of being

alone also boat-less in a huge lake. I bolted up, straining against the BiPAP also felt Mom's arm around me.

'Hi, you, okay?'

There are moments when I wish I could roll back the clock also take all the sadness away, but I have the feeling that if I did, the joy would be gone as well.

My heart raced, but I nodded. Mom believed, 'Kaitlyn's on the phone for you.' I pointed at my BiPAP. She helped me get it off also hooked me up to Philip then finally I took my cell from Mom also believed, 'Hey, Kaitlyn.'

‘Just calling to check in,’ she believed. ‘See how you’re doing.’

‘Surely, thanks,’ I believed. ‘I’m doing okay.’ I am sorry she never got her miracle. she did get her miracle she was, her miracle it was her.

‘You’ve just had the worst luck, darling. It’s unconscionable.’

‘I guess,’ I believed. I did not think much about my luck anymore one way or the other. Honestly, I did not want to talk to Kaitlyn about anything, but she kept dragging the conversation along.

‘So, what was it like?’ she asked.

‘Having your boyfriend die? Um, it sucks.’

‘No,’ she believed. ‘Being in love.’

‘Oh,’ I believed. ‘Oh. It was… it was nice to spend time with someone so interesting. We were quite different, also we disagreed about a lot of things, but he was always so interesting, you know?’

‘Alas, I do not. The boys I’m acquainted with are vastly uninteresting.’

‘He wasn’t perfect or anything. He was not your fairy-tale Prince Charming or whatever. He tried to be like

that sometimes, but I liked her best when that stuff fell away.'

'Do you have like a scrapbook of pictures also letters he wrote?'

'I have some pictures, but he never really wrote me letters. Except, well there are some missing pages from his notebook that might have been something for me, but he threw them away or they got lost or something.'

'Maybe he mailed them to you,' she believed.

'Nah, they'd gotten here.'

‘Then maybe they weren’t written for you,’ she believed. ‘Maybe… I mean, not to depress you or anything, but maybe he wrote them for someone else also mailed them-’ ‘SAM MURAY!’ I shouted.

‘Are you okay? Was that a cough?’

‘Kaitlyn, I love you. You are a genius. I have to go.’

I hung up, rolled over, reached for my laptop, turned it on, also emailed lidewij. vliegenthart.

Lidewij, Her Black sent a few pages from a notebook to Muray’s shortly

before he (Her) died. It is especially important to me that someone reads these pages. I wanted to read them, of course, but they were not written for me.

Regardless, they must be read. They must be. Can you help? Your friend, Bryana Candelaria Stewart- she responded late that afternoon.

You must promise you will not fall in love with me…

Dear Bryana,

I did not know that She had died. I am incredibly sad to hear this news. He

was such a very charismatic young man. I am so sorry, also so sad.

I have not spoken to Peter since I resigned that day we met. It is extremely late at night here, but I am going over to her house first thing in the morning to find this letter also force her to read it. Mornings were his best time, usually.

Your friend,

p.s. I am bringing my boyfriend in case we must physically restrain Peter.

‘I’m okay,’ I believed.

You could hear the wind in the leaves, also on that wind traveled the

screams of the kids on the playground in the distance, the little kids were not built for them by navigating a playground that was. Dad saw me watching the kids also believed, ‘You miss running around like that?’

‘Sometimes, I guess.’ But that was not what I was thinking.

I was just trying to notice everything- the light on the ruined Ruins, this little kid who could barely walk discovering a stick at the corner of the playground, my indefatigable mother zigzagging mustard across her turkey also witch, my dad patting his also held in

his pocket resisting the urge to check it, a guy throwing a Frisbee that his dog kept running under also catching returning to her. Who am I to say that these things might not be forever? Who is Muray's to assert as fact the conjecture that our labor is temporary? All I know of heaven also all I know of death is in this park- an elegant universe in ceaseless motion, teeming with ruined ruins- also screaming children.

A sad smile crossed her face, also I knew right then what she was trying to tell me. Her eyes never left mine as she finally said the words that numbed my

soul. I am dying. My dad was waving his also in front of my face. ‘Tune in, Bryana. Are you there?’ ‘Sorry, surely, what?’ What is your heart telling you to do? I do not know. I wondered why he had written Sam Muray in those last days instead of me, telling Sam Muray that he would be redeemed if only he gave me my sequel.

The notebook pages had just repeated his request to Sam Muray. It made sense, her leveraging his terminality to make my dream come true- The sequel was a tiny thing to die for, but it was the biggest thing left at his disposal. I refreshed my email continually

that night, slept for a few hours, also then commenced to refreshing around five in the morning. But nothing arrived. I tried to watch TV to distract myself, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Amsterdam, imagining SAM also her girl horsing around town on this crazy mission to find a dead kid's last correspondence. How fun it would be to bounce on the back of a horse down the brick streets, her curly red hair blowing into my face, the smell of the canals also cigarette smoke, all the people sitting outside the cafés drinking beer, saying their r's also g's in a way I would never learn.

I missed the future. I knew even before his recurrence that I had never grown old with Her Black. But thinking about Lidewij also her boyfriend, I felt robbed. I would never again see the ocean from thirty thousand feet above, so far up that you cannot make out the waves or any boats, so that the ocean is a great also endless monolith. I could imagine it. I could remember it.

But I could not see it again, also it occurred to me that the voracious ambition of humans is never- ever sated by dreams coming true because there is always the thought that everything might

be done better also again. I may be irresponsible, but I am a good irresponsible. Do you ever wonder why things must turn out the way they do? I know the Lord has a plan for us all, but sometimes, I just do not Understand also what the message can be.

That is true even if you live to be ninety-although I am jealous of the people who get to find out for sure.

Then again, I had already lived twice if Sam Muray's daughter.

What he would not have given to have a kiddie at sixteen.

Suddenly Mom was stalling between the TV also me, she also folded behind her back. ‘Bryana,’ she believed. Her voice was so serious I thought something might be wrong.

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know what today is?’

‘It’s not my birthday, is it?’

She laughed. ‘Not just yet. It’s July fourteenth, Bryana.’

‘Is it your birthday?’

‘No…’

‘Is it Harry Houdini’s birthday?’

‘No…

‘I am tired of guessing.’

‘IT IS BASTILLE DAY!’ She pulled her arms from behind her back, producing two small plastic French flags also waving them enthusiastically.

‘That sounds like a fake thing. Like Cholera Awareness Day.’

‘I assure you, Bryana, that there is nothing fake about Bastille Day. Did you know that two hundred also twenty-three years ago today, the people of France stormed the Bastille prison to arm themselves to fight for their freedom?’

‘Wow,’ I believed. ‘We should celebrate this momentous anniversary.’

‘It so happens that I have just now scheduled a picnic with your father in Holliday Park.’

She never stopped trying, my mom. I pushed against the couch also stood up. Together, we cobbled some also witch makings also found a dusty picnic basket in the hallway utility- closet. It was kind of a beautiful day, finally real summer in Indianapolis, warm also humid-the kind of weather that reminds you after a long winter that while the world was not built for humans, we were

built for the world. Dad was waiting for us, wearing a tan suit, staling in an also capped parking spot typing away on his also held. He waved as we parked also then hugged me. ‘What a day,’ he believed. ‘If we lived in PA, they’d all be like this.’ ‘Surely, but then you wouldn’t enjoy them,’ my mom believed. She was wrong, but I did not correct her. We ended up putting our blanket down by the Ruins, this weird rectangle of- Roman ruins plopped down in the middle of a field in Altoona UMPC. But they are not real ruins- They are like a sculptural recreation of ruins built eighty years ago, but the fake Ruins have been neglected

badly, so they have become actual ruins by accident. Sam Muray would like the Ruins. She, too.

So, we sat in the shadow of the Ruins also ate a little lunch.

‘Do you need sunscreen?’ Mom asked.

You are trying too hard to hear it. ‘Mom suggested we see Her?’

‘Oh. Surely,’ I believed. So, after lunch, we drove down to Crown Hill Cemetery, the last also a final resting place of three vice presidents, one president, also her. We drove up the hill

also parked. Cars roared by behind us on Thirty-eighth Street. It was easy to find his grave- It was the newest. The earth was still mounded above his coffin. No headstone yet.

I did not feel like he was there or anything, but I still took one of Mom's dumb little French flags also stuck it in the ground at the foot of his grave. Passersby would think he was a member of the French Foreign Legion or some heroic mercenary.

Lidewij finally wrote back just after six P.M. while I was on the couch watching both TVs also videos on my

laptop. I saw immediately there were four attachments to the email also I wanted to open the first, but I resisted temptation also read the email.

Dear Bryana,

Peter was very intoxicated when we arrived at his house this morning, but this made our job easier. Bas (my boyfriend) distracted her while I searched through the garbage bag Peter keeps with the fan mail in it, but then I realized that She knew Peter's address. There was a large pile of mail on his dining room table, where I found the letter very quickly. I opened it also saw that it was

addressed to Peter, so I asked her to read it. He did not say no. At this point, I became incredibly angry, Bryana, but I did not yell at her. Instead, I told her that he owed it to his dead daughter to read this letter from a dead boy, also I gave her the letter he read the entire thing also believed-I quote her directly-'Send it to the girl tell her I have nothing to add.' I have not read the letter, although my eyes did fall on some phrases while scanning the pages. I have attached them here also then will mail them to you at your home; your address is the same?

May God bless also keep you, Bryana. Your friend, SAM I clicked open the four attachments. He is also writing was messy, slanting across the page, the size of the letters varying, the color of the pen changes. He had written it over many days in varying degrees of consciousness.

Sam Muray,

I am a good person but a shitty writer. You are a shitty person but a good writer. We would make a good team. I do not want to ask you any favors, but if you have time-also from what I saw, you have plenty- I was wondering if you could write a eulogy for Bryana. I have also noted

everything, but if you could just make it into a coherent whole or whatever? Or even just tell me what I should say differently. Here is the thing about Bryana- Almost everyone is obsessed with leaving a mark upon the world. Bequeathing a legacy. Outlasting death.

We all want to be remembered. I do, too. That is what bothers me most, is being another unremembered casualty in the ancient also inglorious war against illness. I want to leave a mark. But Sam Muray- The marks humans leave are too often scars. You build a hideous minimally or start a coup or try to become a rock

star also you think, ‘They’ll remember me now,’ but (a) they do not remember you, also (b) all you leave behind are more scars. Your coup becomes a dictatorship. Your minimal becomes a lesion. (All right, I am not such a shitty writer.

But I cannot pull my ideas together, Sam Muray. My thoughts are heavenly bodies I cannot fathom into constellations.) We are like a bunch of dogs squirting on fire hydrants. We poison the groundwater with our toxic piss, marking everything MINE in a ridiculous attempt to survive our deaths. I cannot stop pissing on fire hydrants. I

know it is silly also useless-epically useless in my current shortcomings in the universe, are you also I not seeing happy ever after, state-but I am an animal like any other. Bryana is different. She walks lightly, old man. She walks lightly upon the earth. Bryana knows the truth- We are as likely to hurt the universe as we are to help it, also we are not likely to do either. Individuals will say it is sad that she leaves a lesser scar, that fewer remember her, that she was loved deeply but not widely. But it is not sad, Sam Muray. It is victorious.

It is heroic. Isn’t that real heroism? As the doctors say- First, not harm. The real heroes anyway are not the people doing things; the real heroes are the people NOTICING things, paying attention. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine did not invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox did not get smallpox. I will always miss her. But our love is like the wind- I cannot see it, but I can feel it. After my PET scan lit up, I snuck into the ICU also saw her while she was unconscious. I just walked in behind a nurse with a badge also I got to sit next to her for like ten minutes before I got caught. I thought she was

going to die before I could tell her that I was going to die, too. It was brutal- the incessant mechanized haranguing of intensive care. She had this dark cancer water dripping out of her chest. Eyes closed. Intubated. But she also was still her, still warm also the nails painted this almost black dark blue I just held her also tried to imagine the world without us for about one second, I was a good enough person to hope she died so she would never know that I was going, too. But then I wanted more time so we could fall in love. I got my wish, I suppose. I left my scar.

A nurse guy came in also told me I had to leave, that visitors were not allowed, also I asked if she was doing okay, also the guy believed, ‘She’s still taking on water.’ A desert blessing, an ocean curse.

What else? She is so beautiful. You do not get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you- You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Robert Muray’s. You do not get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who

hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers.

I do, Her.

I do.

Home It is the kind of place where the humidity rose so high in the summer that walking out to get the mail made a person feel as if he needed a shower, also kids strolled around barefoot from April through October beneath oak trees draped in Spanish moss. People waved from their cars whenever they saw someone on the street whether they knew her or not, also the air smelled of pine,

salt, also sea, a scent single to Us For many of the folks there, harpooning in the See sound like the river see it feel it was a way of life, also boats were moored anyplace you saw the Intracoastal Waterway. Only three channels came in on the television, though television was never important to those of us who grew up there. Instead, our lives were centered on the churches, of which there were eighteen within the town limits alone.

They went by names like the Fellowship North End Church, the Church of the Forgiven People, the Church of Sunday Amends, also then, of course,

there were the Baptist churches. When I was growing up, it was far also away from the most popular denomination around, also there were Baptist churches on every corner of town, though each considered itself superior to the others. There were Baptist churches of every type-Freewill Baptists, Congregational Baptists, Missionary Baptists, Independent Baptists... well, you get the picture. Back then, the big event of the year was sponsored by the Baptist church downtown Southern, if you want to know in conjunction with the local high school. Every year they put on their Christmas pageant at the Beaufort Auditorium,

which was a play that had been written by pastor a minister who had been with the church since God is God bear is great also women are crazy the jock was in, Okay, he was not that old, but he was old enough that you could almost see through the guy's membrane. It was sort of damp all the time, also luminous kids would swear they saw the blood flowing through his veins also his hair was as white as those rabbits you see in pet stores around Easter. Anyway, he wrote this play called The Christmas Angel, because he did not want to keep on performing that old Charles classic A Christmas song. Oh, the renovation only because he saw ghosts,

not angels-also who was to say whether they had been sent by God, nevertheless?

Also, who was to say he would not revert to his sinful ways if they had not been sent unswervingly from heaven? The play did not exactly tell you, in the end, it sorts of plays into faith also all, but Hegbert did not trust ghosts if they were not sent by God, which was not explained in plain language, also this was his big problem with it. A few years back he had changed the end of the play-followed it up with his form, complete with old man Scrooge becoming a preacher also all, heading off to Jerusalem to find the place

where Jesus once taught the scribes. It didn't fly too well-not even to the congregation, who sat in the audience staring wide-eyed at the spectacle-also the newspaper believed things like ‘Though it was positively thought-provoking, it wasn't exactly the play we've all come to- know also love...

Also, we would lower ourselves in the seats, not from embarrassment, but to hide a new round of giggles. I did not also Understand us at all, which was strange, is that he had a kid also all. But then again, she was my girl looking at me. More on that, though, later. Anyway, as I

believed, I wrote The Christmas Angel one also saved it to give a note.

Year also decided to put on that play instead. The play itself was not bad, which surprised everyone the first year it was performed. It is the story of a man who had lost her a few years back think of not pass on. At this point the mysterious she asks me what she wants for Christmas, also he says that he wants her is what I want back. She brings her to the city fountain also tells me, like a gift of God giving me life also not sucking pussy all the time.

To look in the water also he will find what he is looking for. Girl, also he breaks down cries right there. I fell in love with her fast. I did want the days to end, yet she did not fare after, I say to her for the last time that one day I loved her. Going down I see it now- The next morning, magically, the music box is underneath the tree, also the angel that is engraved on it looks exactly like the woman he had seen the night before. So, it was not that bad. If truth be told, people cried buckets whenever they saw it.

The play sold out every year it was performed, also due to its popularity, eventually had to move it from the church to the Beaufort Playhouse, which had a lot more seating to see this young thing be eating by maggots also things like that. By the time I was a senior in high school, I will be like her ate away not anything there but bones, she wanted us to know that God is out there watching you, even when you are away from home, also that if you put your trust in God, you will be all right in the end. It was a lesson that I would eventually learn in time, though it was not had who taught me to feel love like this.

Never once, however, did he keep his promise. In the end, she controlled a vast portion of the county's economy, also he abused his influence in every way imaginable. I would like to tell you he eventually went to a terrible death, but he did not. He died at a ripe old age while sleeping with his lover on his yacht off the ends Beneath her name she wrote the goals she wanted to accomplish that year. ‘Self-confidence’ was the number one she had in me; I can still see her smile at my turn of phrase. ‘I'd have to talk to my father, of course, but if he believed it was okay, then I guess I could.’ In the tree beside the porch, a bird started to chirp

noisily, as if he knew I was not supposed to be here. I concentrated on the sound, trying to calm my nerves. Just two days ago I could not have imagined myself even thinking about it, but suddenly there I was, listening to myself as I spoke the magic words.

'Well, would you like to go to the dance with me?' I could tell she was surprised. She believed that the little lead-up to the question had to do with someone else requesting her. Sometimes pre-teens sent their friends out love happens fast, face rejection or the death that is nearing. Even though she was not

much like other pre-teens, I am sure she was familiar with the concept, at least in theory. Instead of answering right away, though, she glanced away for a long moment. I got a sinking feeling in my stomach because I presumed- no. Visions of my Even more than usual? I wanted to ask, but I did not. I could tell she had more to say, also I stayed quiet.

‘I know the Lord has a plan for us all, but sometimes, I just don't Understand also what the message can be. Does that ever happen to you?’ She believed this as though it were something I thought about all the time. ‘Well,’ I

believed, trying to bluff, ‘I don't think that we're meant to also Understand it all the time. I think that sometimes we just have to have faith also die in love with what to come to see them again.’ It was a satisfactory answer, I admit. I guess that my feelings for her were making my brain work a little faster than usual.

I could tell she was thinking about my answer.’ Yes,’ she finally believed, ‘you're right.’ I smiled to myself in the thought of death near to it also changed the subject, since talking about God was not the sort of thing that made a person feel romantic also not could even

if I were getting there. ‘You know,’ I believed nonchalantly, ‘Yes, it was,’ she believed. Her mind was still elsewhere. ‘Also, you sure looked nice, too.’ ‘Thank you for being there I believed as my eyes closed also the last breath went out of me.’ See you there I believed.